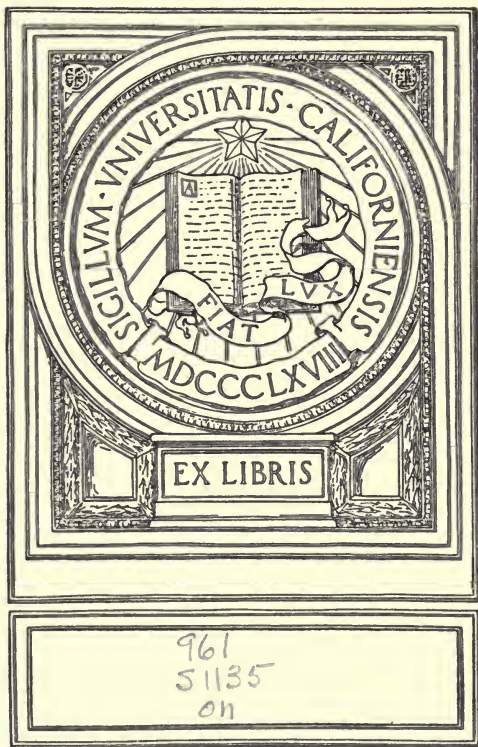


ON THE OVERLAND STAGE



EDWIN·L·SABIN



961
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on

1918 Christmas.

Bernard Nichols.



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Frontis.

"IS THAT YOU, BILL? WHAT'S THE MATTER? WHERE YOU GOING?"

ON THE OVERLAND STAGE

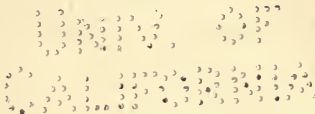
OR

TERRY AS A KING WHIP CUB

BY

EDWIN L. SABIN

*Author of "BAR B BOYS," "THE BOY SETTLER,"
"THE GREAT PIKE'S PEAK RUSH," ETC.*



Statesmen and warriors, traders and the rest,
May boast of their profession, and think it is the best;
Their state I'll never envy, I'll have you understand,
Long as I can be a driver on the jolly "Overland."
"Song of the Overland Stage-Driver" (1865)

NEW YORK
THOMAS Y. CROWELL COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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ALBANY, N. Y.

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on

ALONG THE LINE

ON THE OLD WAY-BILL

TERRY RICHARDS Who Aspires to be a King Whip
GEORGE STANTON Another Overland "Cub"
VIRGIE STANTON A Little Heroine of the Plains
MR. AND MRS. RICHARDS }
MR. AND MRS. STANTON } Their Sometimes Anxious Parents
HARRY REVERE A Model Station Keeper
SOL JUDY Who Also Rides the Plains
PINE KNOT IKE The Last of a Bad Egg
LEFT HAND A Marrying Arapaho
SHEP A Dog Veteran
DUKE, THE HALF-BUFFALO..Who Becomes Injun Meat
JENNY, THE YELLOW MULE..Captive to the Cheyennes

ON THE NEW WAY-BILL

"BEN" HOLLADAY The Great Stage Owner
"MISTER" GEORGE OTIS....General Superintendent
"WILD BILL" HICKOK.....Who Shoots Hard
BILLY CODY Of the Pony Express
JACK SLADE The Overland Terror
SAM CLEMENS}
ARTEMUS WARD} Funny-Men Passengers
RANCHER HOLLEN GODFREY.Brave Captain of "Fort Wicked"
SI PERKINS His Helper
FRIDAY An Educated Indian
THE SCAR-FACE Who Gets His Deserts

BILL TROTTER, "Teddy" Nichols, "Tommy" Ryan, Bob
Hodge, and other "king whips" of the Overland; mes-
sengers, agents, soldiers, ranchers, "hostiles," and so
forth.

TIME AND PLACE: The Overland Stage route from the
Missouri to Salt Lake; 1861-1865.



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ON THE OVERLAND STAGE

CHAPTER I

"ALL 'BOARD"

It was late afternoon of the middle of April, 1861. In famous Gregory Gulch of the Rocky Mountains, forty-five miles west from Denver City, new Colorado Territory, the Virginia Consolidated gold mining company was just beginning another year's work.

Present: young Terry Richards and his father; young George Stanton and his father; and Virgie Stanton, girl, who was George's little sister. Also, Shep, shaggy black dog; Jenny, the yellow mule; and Duke, half cow, half buffalo, captured by Terry two years before in a buffalo hunt with the Delaware Indians back in Kansas.

This was not the whole Virginia Consolidated family. Terry's mother and George's mother were still down in Denver; Harry Revere, the plucky, slender school-teacher, who, with Terry, had driven Duke and Jenny across-country from the Richards ranch in Kansas to the "Pike's Peak country" two years ago,

was riding special "pony express" between Denver and the main Overland Stage line, so as to bring the war news quickly, and Sol Judy, the plainsman and California Fortyniner, was driving the Denver stage on the same route.

Harry and Sol likely would come in, a little later; and so would the two mothers, when the snows had quit.

"'Bout time for the stage, isn't it?" remarked Terry's father, straightening up from cleaning out a ditch, to peer down the road for the first sign of the stage that ran between Denver and Central City of the Gulch. "I'm powerful anxious to get the news."

"Let's hope it won't be war," said Mr. Stanton.

"Well," sighed Terry's father, "things look bad. The President's speech showed that he wouldn't back down."

"I know it," admitted George's father.

Both men sobered. So did Terry and George. Yes, things indeed looked bad out East, in the "States." Last fall Abraham Lincoln had been elected President of the United States—which was not bad, but good; and the Southern States that favored the keeping of slaves by anybody who wished to do so threatened to withdraw from the Union.

The great news of Abraham Lincoln's election was carried by the Pony Express, from the Missouri River to California, 2,000 miles, in eight days!

Then South Carolina did withdraw. Then President Buchanan, before he retired, declined to recog-

nize the right of any state to secede. This message also was carried across continent in eight days.

Then the Southern members of the President's cabinet resigned. Then other Southern States seceded. Then President Lincoln, in his inauguration speech on March 4, said that if States were permitted to withdraw whenever they desired, there could be no National government. He had no legal right yet to abolish slavery in the South, and the Southern States were protected by the Constitution; but they could not secede.

This important speech was carried across the plains and mountains and deserts in seven days and seventeen hours!

Now seven Southern States were out—had formed the Confederate States of America, and were claiming all the ports and forts within their boundaries, and all the United States supplies there. The whole Far West country was breathlessly awaiting further news.

For this it depended upon the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak stage line, and especially upon the Pony Express.

The Pony Express was a wonderful service. It had been started a year ago by Messrs. Russell, Majors and Waddell, operators of the C. O. C. & P. P. stage line from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Salt Lake City, Utah. There had been eighty relay riders, and 500 extra-fast horses, stationed at intervals clear across from the Missouri River at St. Joseph to Sacramento of California. Forty riders were constantly chasing one way, and forty the other way. Day or night, they were

obliged to cover ten miles every hour, but the record stood at ten miles in thirty-one minutes!

Some of the riders rode 120 miles at a stretch; they changed to a fresh horse about every ten miles; they far beat the stages, which averaged five miles an hour, by plains and mountains, and had a ten-day schedule to Salt Lake, 1,200 miles. The Pony Express got there in five days!

The Express did not pass through Denver. It followed the Russell, Majors and Waddell "Overland" stage line, which veered for the north at Julesburg on the South Platte River 200 miles northeast of Denver. But from Julesburg a stage was run three times a week to Denver, and in these exciting times the *Rocky Mountain News* had put on a special express rider, to meet the incoming mail and dispatches at Bijou station, 100 miles out, and gallop back with them, thus saving about twelve hours' time.

Harry Revere was that rider. He weighed only 140 pounds (which was the limit for a Pony Express man), and he certainly could ride. He changed horses every ten or fifteen miles, at the stations and ranches. Terry and George envied him that job, but they had to go to school all winter.

The *News* had a branch office at Central City, here in the Gregory Gulch "diggin's." The branch office posted bulletins of "extras" as soon as word was received by the local stage from Denver. It was high time that the stage arrived, too.

"I see it!" suddenly cried Virgie. "And it's in an awful hurry."

Everybody looked.

"That's not the stage. That's only a man horse-back," corrected George. "Can't you tell a man horse-back from a stage-coach?"

"By ginger, he's in a hurry, whoever he is!" exclaimed George's father. "He must have something important to say."

And that was true. Here in the mountains they did not know, yet; but for three nights and days other horsemen had been galloping, galloping, headlong upon the Pony Express route across the Great Plains, bearing onward the alarm clicked off by the telegraph at St. Joseph on the Missouri River.

In another night and day it would reach the top of the continent in Wyoming, far north; in another it would be thrilling Salt Lake City, in Utah west of the mountains; in two more it would be put on the telegraph at the Sierra Nevada mountains of Western Nevada and dispatched across to Sacramento of California and down to San Francisco.

The rider hastening up the gulch road was riding furiously. He scarcely rose and fell in his saddle, so tightly he clung; but, bent forward, he lifted his horse, with spur and rein, at every stride. He had turned into the main gulch, at the mouth, below the Virginia Consolidated; the town of Black Hawk there seemed to be cheering him; miners all along the stage road were dropping their tools and quitting work to watch him; teams were pulling aside for him; in a few minutes he would pass the Virginia.

"That's Harry! That's Harry Revere!" shouted

Terry. "He's riding express for Central! Hooray!"

"Not 'Hooray'!" gravely rebuked his father. "It means war. The way he rides, he's bringing news of war."

And Harry Revere it was. The gulch was quite narrow, the stage road up along the creek below their own little ravine was near. They might see Harry plainly. His hat brim flared back, he was digging in his heels, his horse was splattered with lather, and tired. By he swept, with only wave of arm at them; and the rapid drum of his hoof-beats echoed behind him as he tore on for the *News* office at Central.

"We'd better go up there, Ralph." And George's father dropped his pick.

"Yes, we had." And Terry's father dropped his spade.

"Come on, Terry." And George and Terry and Virgie followed, Shep soberly at their heels.

Central City mining-camp was about two miles up the gulch. Harry's hard riding evidently had aroused general curiosity, for already streams of people, afoot and ahorse, were hurrying to learn what was the matter. There were all kinds of rumors.

"Denver's been burnt!"

"The Injuns are out!"

"Washington's captured!"

"The President's been assassinated!"

"The South has given in!"

A man horseback from Black Hawk pushed through, by the trail.

"War's begun! The South has commenced firing!

War's begun!" he proclaimed, right and left, as he charged on.

"How d'you know?"

"Express from Denver. Didn't you see him? He said so."

Cheers arose: cheers for the North, cheers for the South. The gulch was peopled with men from both sections. The procession hastened more earnestly.

"Ha! That means a call by the President for troops. And I shall go," uttered Terry's father.

"Yes? So shall I, of course," answered George's father.

"Can I go, Dad?" demanded George eagerly. His black eyes snapped. He was a wiry, pugnacious chap, was George Stanton. "We'll go, won't we, Terry?"

"If they'll take us."

"We can be drummer-boys."

Virgie began to weep, as she trudged trying to keep up.

"I don't want you to go. I don't want anybody to go. I don't like war."

"Aw, what you bawling for?" scoffed George. "That won't save the Union."

Before they got to Central, they sighted Harry coming down afoot. He was being stopped every few steps; but when he saw them he shook himself free and met them. He looked very tired.

"Hello," he greeted wanly.

"Is that true? Has war opened? Is there fighting?"

A half score of voices volleyed at him, almost

drowning the queries of Terry's and George's fathers.

"Yes. Fort Sumter's been bombarded," panted Harry.

"Where's that?" asked somebody.

"Off Charleston, South Carolina. Confederate batteries began to bombard it early Friday morning the twelfth. It had to surrender the next afternoon. You can read all about it at the *News* office in Central. I'm tired out, gentlemen," and Harry threw up his hands with a weak smile. "I've ridden lickity-split a hundred and fifty miles since morning, with only a half-hour rest."

"Bully for you," they praised.

"Seventy hours, St. Joseph to Denver—that's the record for this message," continued Harry, as he and the Virginia Consolidated squad proceeded down to the mine. "Six hundred and fifty miles in seventy hours; average of over nine miles an hour, including changes. I took the message off the stage at Bijou Junction, and rode the hundred miles down in six hours; had half an hour at Denver while the *News* got out an extra; Mr. Byers [he was editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*] wanted the special rushed into the mountains, so I brought a batch through in three hours for the forty-five miles. I had only one change of horse or I might have done better. I've a copy of the special in my pocket for you."

"Crickity! I call that some riding," blurted George admiringly.

"Oh, I don't know," laughed Harry. "Last year Jim Moore on the regular Pony Express made the

round-trip between Midway and Julesburg, of two hundred and eighty miles, in eighteen and a quarter hours, with only ten minutes' rest; averaged over eighteen miles an hour. There's a fifteen or sixteen-year-old boy named Billy Cody, on the North Platte route, who rode three hundred and twenty miles, without any rest, at fifteen miles an hour. And over in Nevada Bob Haslam has ridden three hundred and eighty miles at a stretch. So I'm not crowing. But I did the best I could."

"Has the President called for troops?" asked Mr. Richards.

"Not yet. But, of course, he will—seventy-five or a hundred thousand, probably, the *News* says."

"I'm going, then. I want to be among the first."

Harry was as tired as his horse had been (he was handicapped by a lame foot, since a time when he was thrown from bareback, while a boy in Virginia), but they all sat up late this night, in the mine cabin, talking. There was a bonfire and excitement at Black Hawk, below, and the same at Central City, above; all the "diggin's" was in a furor. And westward, ever westward, by Pony Express across the mountains, for Utah, Nevada and California, was still speeding the word that Fort Sumter and its United States flag had been fired upon, and that the Civil War had actually begun.

Terry's father decided to leave for Denver by the first stage.

"The women folks will be nervous," he declared. "And I ought to be there, ready for the call."

"Where do you intend to enlist, Ralph?" inquired George's father.

"Back in Kansas, among my old friends. I'll 'tend to the ranch business, while I'm there. I thought I'd sold the ranch, but those fellows don't seem to be making their payments, and I may have to take it again. Where will you enlist?"

"I don't know," replied Mr. Stanton slowly. "I'm as anxious as you are, but perhaps I'd better stay in Colorado, and wind up our mine affairs. There'll be Colorado troops, I suppose."

"Aw, don't we do our mining?" exclaimed George.

"No, sir! That amounts to nothing, now. When the Government calls, it's every citizen's duty to drop his business if he can, and offer himself."

"Do I go to Kansas, Dad? Will you take me?" voiced Terry.

"Yes, I think I will," said his father. "You and your mother both. You'll be safer in case the Indians break out."

"I'll stay with my dad and fight Injuns!" cried George.

"There's some truth in that," agreed his father. "If the Indians get rambunctious and the Southern troops try to march up from Texas, Colorado'll have plenty of work. What are your plans, Harry? You're a Virginian, I believe."

So he was; and they all waited intently to hear his answer.

"Well," mused Harry, "my folks are Southerners; that's sure; and I was raised in the South. I don't

suppose I could get into either army, with my lame foot. The war may not last long, anyway. The North says three months. I'd hate to fight against my own kin—and I'd hate to fight against the Flag, and you fellows. I reckon, as long as I've got to be a non-combatant, I'll keep a-riding. That'll let some other man carry my gun."

"Of course, my wife will stay out here while I stay," spoke George's father to Terry's. "So will George. But if there's much trouble with the Indians or from the Southern people I'd feel easier to have Virgie somewhere else. What do you think about taking her East with you for a spell?"

"Glad to do so. She can live with Terry and his mother just as well as not. Maybe on the ranch; or if Kansas is raided, they can all get quarters in Leavenworth."

"I don't want to go," wailed Virgie.

"Yes, you do, Virgie," Terry comforted. "We'll ride on the stage and have a lot of fun."

This certainly was a sudden great change of plans. Here they all had prepared to start the quartz mill at once and make a big summer's run of gold from the Virginia Consolidated, not to speak of enjoying life in the mountains; and almost in a twinkling they had decided to close up shop again—George and his father were to stay for a while in Denver, Terry and his father and mother and Virgie were to hurry across the plains by Overland stage for Kansas, Harry would keep on riding express, what Sol Judy would do they did not know; Shep had said not a word, but he'd go

where Terry went; Jenny, Harry's yellow mule, and Duke, Terry's half-buffalo, would have to be put at pasture.

So it was arranged. And throughout the wide nation the plans of other people were being upset, too. No place, whether it be a New York or a Gregory Gulch in the Rocky Mountains, can escape being affected by war when war occurs.

Terry and his father and Virgie piled into the Hinckley stage down, the next morning, for Denver, to book early passage on the Overland to the Missouri River—a round six hundred and fifty miles. Shep accompanied, afoot. Harry already had started back on his horse.

"We'll be down to see you off," called George to Terry. "You'd better have your hair cut short, so the Injuns won't get it!"

CHAPTER II

ON THE BOX OF THE OVERLAND

"ALL 'board!" Driver Sol Judy's voice sounded briskly, as he strode out from the C. O. C. & P. P. stage office, his whip under his arm while he drew on his gloves in preparation to mount the box and gather the lines.

The Terry party had been ready for two weeks, but this was the earliest "booking" that they could secure.

The C. O. C. & P. P. stage on the Denver branch line left Denver only three times a week, to connect with the main Overland line at Julesburg, about two hundred miles northwest on the South Platte River. The war news brought by Harry Revere had created intense excitement. The next Pony Express dispatch had said that the President had called for 75,000 volunteers to serve for three months. This increased the rush of people wishing to go East.

George and his father had come down from the mine to see the Richards and Virgie off. Now George had Virgie by the one hand and Terry had her by the other, while they made a bee-line for the stage office at the Planter's House.

A large crowd had collected there. Sol had called

"All 'board!"—his figure might be sighted passing through the lane respectfully opened for him—a hostler was holding the lead team by the bits, another held the lines. Virgie, hurrying as fast as she could, between the two boys, panted and wailed.

"Will we be too late? Won't we ride on the box? I want to ride on the box with Sol."

"He promised to save it for us, but maybe he'll forget," gasped Terry. The driver's box was the choice seat.

"Come on, Virgie. Don't bawl," George urged. "We're almost there."

Sol was just about to climb up. His foot was upon the wheel hub and his gloved hand upon the seat rail. The boot at the coach rear was bulging with baggage and mail, and passengers' heads were sticking out from the coach body, for good-byes with relatives and friends.

Virgie panted hopefully. There was nobody on the box yet. But as Sol swung to his seat, someone else swung also, from the opposite side, and wellnigh plumped into him.

He was a shaggy sort of man, with black whiskers covering his face from his bushy eyebrows down, and unkempt black hair. He wore a dilapidated, black slouch hat, blue flannel shirt, belted trousers tucked into heavy boots, and a six-shooter at his right hip.

Virgie cried shrilly, in despair; and Terry exclaimed disgustedly:

"Aw, thunder! Now we've lost it. That's Pine Knot Ike. He won't give it up."

"There's room for three, but you wouldn't ride there with him, anyway," growled George.

But Sol was attending to the matter promptly.

"Well, what do you calculate to do up here?" he demanded.

"I reckon I'm goin' to ride. That's what this thing's got wheels under it for, ain't it?" retorted Pine Knot Ike.

"You may be going to ride, but you don't ride on this box along with me," answered Sol. "So I'll thank you to get off and get under."

"Why so? I've paid my fare, an' this seat ain't okkipied."

"Yes, 'tis," answered Sol.

"Who by?"

"By the driver."

"I reckon you aim to cover too much territory," sneered Pine Knot Ike. He was a very unpleasant character. George and Terry—and Virgie as well—had met him before. His reputation had not improved any, either, since he had been in the Gregory "diggin's."

"I need plenty of room," said Sol. "I always scrooge 'round consider'ble. Now, are you going to get off feet first or head first; 'cause this stage can't stand here all day, waiting?"

Pine Knot Ike swelled wrathfully.

"Don't crowd me," he warned. "My name's Ike Chubbers, but I air called Pine Knot, for I'm so awful tough. I appeal to this hyar crowd if it's standin' by an' seein' a prominent citizen abused after he's paid

his fare an' is bound to fight for his country. I'm natur'ly a man o' peace, but when I'm crowded I'm apt to rare up. I can be pushed jest so fur——"

"I'll help you along," rapped Sol, with sudden movement. In a jiffy he had grasped Pine Knot by the collar and a leg, and thrown him off sprawling.

Virgie gasped—"Is he hurt?" But George yelled gleefully like an Indian, and Terry and most of the crowd joined. There was small sympathy for Pine Knot. No passenger might ride on the box, except by the driver's permission. The driver "owned" the box, just as an engineer "owns" his cab. It was a law of the Overland Stage.

Pine Knot Ike was not hurt. No doubt his "toughness" saved him. He scrambled to his feet and roared:

"I'll see the agent about this. I'll see if a peaceful-abidin' citizen who's paid his fare——"

"Go ahead and see him," replied Sol. "When I'm on this box I'm a bigger man than the agent."

"What's the matter here?" Terry's folks and George's folks arrived.

"Pine Knot Ike had our seat, and Sol threw him right off," explained Virgie.

"Oh, dear! Is he a passenger, too?" sighed Terry's mother.

"That's all right," hastily spoke Mr. Richards. "Terry and Virgie can ride inside. Don't let's start off by making trouble."

But Sol carried the day.

"All 'board!" he called again. "Here, you——" and

he crooked his finger at his two friends below. "Come aloft."

Good! Virgie was boosted up, Terry climbed after.

"Toss your traps on the upper deck," bade Sol to the others; and the hand luggage landed on the flat top of the stage, where a railing kept such stuff from sliding off. Each passenger was allowed only twenty-five pounds. Trunks had to go by wagon-freight.

Terry's father and mother hastily entered the stage.

"Hey!" yelled a voice. "Whar's my seat? I claim that thar seat!"

But Sol paid no attention. He took the lines of the six-horse team, handed up to him by the respectful helper, assorted them in his fingers, nodded at the hostler holding the bits of the lead team, the hostler sprang aside, with a clang the heavy brake was kicked free—and Pine Knot Ike dived into the stage door just as, with a great leap, the six horses sprang forward.

The crowd cheered.

"Hang onto your hair, Terry!" shouted George. "I'll be good to Shep." For there was no way of taking a dog.

"Good-bye, good-bye!"

They were off. Distance to the Missouri River, six hundred and fifty-two miles; time, six days; fare, \$75; meals, \$1 to 50 cents, at the station houses; sleeping quarters, the stage itself.

Sol let his horses gallop, and snapped his gold watch.

"Five minutes late," he remarked. "All on account of that seat-hog. But we'll make it up, if we don't

bust a thorough-brace. We're loaded plumb to the guards."

The thorough-brace, of course, was one of the broad, thick leather straps upon which the coach body was slung instead of on springs. The coach itself was a round-bodied Concord, made by the celebrated stage-coach builders, the Abbott-Downing Company, of Concord, New Hampshire. It held nine passengers inside; three to a seat. Behind there was an immense triangular rack, covered by a leather flap, for baggage. This was the "boot"; and underneath the driver's seat there was another boot, with a leather curtain in front, where valuable express was to be stored, when necessary.

The coach had been painted black, but was now gray with the whitish dust of the plains. The flap of the rear boot had two arrow holes through it, from an Indian attack; so had a door panel—clear through; the roof was scarred by hail. The gilt letters "C. O. C. & P. P." for Central Overland California & Pike's Peak, running across lengthwise just under the top rail, had been nearly worn off by sand and weather.

Altogether, it was a veteran coach—an old-timer on the plains.

The six horses in their jingling harness loped easily, and the coach, crammed with passengers, baggage and mail, rocked after on its stout thorough-braces. It was so heavy and so nicely cradled that the bumps in the road were scarcely noticed.

But on the box was the best place. Sol sat straight, with his feet planted firmly on the deep, upward curving dash. Virgie was in the middle; her legs stuck out

before. Terry was at the end; he could feel for the dash, but could barely touch it with his toes.

Inside the coach, the passengers who faced each other almost touched knees, and they all could see out only through the open windows. Sometimes, on account of the dust or sun, they drew down the leather window curtains, which buckled fast. That was rather stuffy. One person might want the curtain down, and another might want it up.

But high on top the coach, close behind the wheel team, anybody had plenty of fresh air and might see everything for miles around.

Terry's hat-brim, like Sol's, flared back in the breeze; Virgie tied tighter the strings of her pink sun-bonnet. At a sandy stretch Sol cleverly pulled down his tugging team to a walk.

"So, boys! Save your wind."

But presently his long lash flew out, and cracked just above the leaders, to break them into a trot. He touched up the swing team (the first pair of horses were the wheel team, the second the swing team, and the third the lead team), straightened all six into a rapid trot, and spoke to Terry.

"Well, when you coming back?"

"I don't know. After the war, I guess."

"Are you going to war, Sol?" asked Virgie.

"Maybe yes, maybe no. I'll go where I'm most needed. I reckon the stages'll have to be kept moving; but a one-legged man can drive and I've got two legs. I'll make another trip or two, then I'll see."

"The war'll be over in three months, won't it?" proposed Terry.

"Huh!" Sol grunted. "Part of that's brag and part of it's hope. You can't depend on either. The North will need three months to get ready in."

The leaving time at Denver was eleven o'clock. The horses moved mainly at a spanking trot; close to five miles an hour was their schedule, for up hill and down. The schedule for the Overland stages was one hundred and twelve miles every twenty-four hours.

The prairie-dogs sat up on their haunches to watch the coach pass; a bunch of antelope flashed their white rumps and scurried away like the wind.

"Don't we see any buffalo, Sol?"

"Well, I'm not particular," mused Sol. "When you see buff'ler you're likely to see Injuns. Last winter I drove through a whole herd, though. They were lying in the trail and I had to shoo at 'em so's to get through."

At Box Elder station, about sixteen miles out, the team was changed. This was a "swing" station. The next station, Living Spring, was a "home" station where meals were served.

The station agent and the "hands" at Box Elder were ready and waiting. As Sol tossed down his lines, he again snapped his watch.

"Give you three minutes to change in," he called. "We're four minutes late. No use getting out," he added to the passengers. "But if you do get out, be ready to get back in mighty quick, for this Overland doesn't wait on anybody, high or low."

The hostlers worked like mad. The six horses, wet and willing, were unhooked and rushed away and four mules, standing already harnessed, were immediately clapped into their places.

"Any war news, Sol?" queried the station-keeper.

"Nope." Sol grasped the bunch of lines, kicked the brake free—"Clang!"—and just as the last hostler sprang away the mules launched out.

"Three minutes exactly," sighed Sol. "Pretty soon I'll educate 'em so they can do it in two."

The mules were lively, and twitched the rumbling, swaying coach as if it were a toy. Gradually the sun sank toward the bluish, white-crested range of the Rockies, far behind in the west. Sol spoke, and pointed with his whip.

"Ought to meet Harry about at the bunch of cottonwoods. Yep, there he comes. See him?"

Away yonder, on the rolling plains ahead, had appeared a dot. It rapidly increased, as it and the coach approached each other. It was a man on horseback—the Pony Express for Denver; and he was coming lickity-split.

At the bunch of cottonwood trees? No—yes! It seemed a race between the coach and the Pony Express. That was Harry Revere, all right. Virgie tore off her sun-bonnet, to wave—and with a wild yell from everybody on the coach and a wild yell from Harry, pass each other they did, in a flash, exactly at the regulation place.

"He's on time," quoth Sol. "And so are we."

Living Spring "home" station was reached at sun-

set. Distance, thirty-five miles; time, seven and one-half hours.

"Look at the Injuns!" exclaimed Terry.

"Yep. 'Rapahos." And, with brake and bits checking his galloping mules short in front of the station door, Sol tossed down the lines to the waiting hostler. "Here's where we eat." He swung to the ground. "Thirty minutes for supper, ladies and gents. Price, one dollar."

"Come on, Virgie." And Terry and Virgie followed.

The station of Living Spring consisted of only the low station house, and the stable shed, both built of sod and clay, with sod roofs. At a little distance on the gravelly, sagy plain there were half a dozen Indian lodges, round and peaked, of blackish buffalo hides.

A number of the Indians—they were Arapahos, all right—men and squaws and children, were on hand to watch the arrival of the stage. Virgie was foolishly afraid of them, and shrank back; but Terry knew Arapahos. They frequently visited Denver.

"How?" he said boldly. "Hello, Left Hand."

It was Left Hand's band. Left Hand was a young chief, next in rank to Little Raven, head chief. He spoke English and acted as Little Raven's interpreter.

"How," grunted Left Hand; from the folds of his blanket he extended his hand to shake. "You ride with mule chief on paper wagon? Huh!" "Paper wagon" was the coach, because it carried the mail.

"Yes. Going to Missouri River."

"Good. Ride heap fast." He pointed at Virgie.
"How much?"

"What do you mean?" asked Terry.

"How much for young squaw?"

"Aw!" attempted Terry—but a voice interrupted.

"Wait a second. Let's have a leetle fun." The voice was that of Pine Knot Ike. Everybody else had entered the station house to wash and eat. But while supper was being prepared, Pine Knot had lingered. "No hard feelin's," he continued. "I'm not a man to cherish hard feelin's. If I'd knowed you an' the gal wanted that thar seat, I'd been glad to 'commodate ye. I air called tough, but I got a soft heart for young folks, 'specially gals. I have ten gals o' my own, in my happy home back in the States." And Pine Knot sniffed through his tangled whiskers. Terry sniffed, too. Pine Knot's breath was suspiciously tainted. "How much you give?" he demanded of Left Hand.

"Four pony," grunted Left Hand.

"What you do with her?" asked Pine Knot.

"Keep. Feed. Need 'nother squaw some day. Make she nice young squaw."

"No, no!" wailed Virgie, aghast, pulling to get free. "I don't want to be a squaw." And away she ran, into the station.

"Four pony too leetle," rapidly said Pine Knot, as if afraid that Terry might break in. "Fine gal; make fine squaw. Six pony."

"Five pony," bargained Left Hand.

"Aw, quit that!" objected Terry. "What's the use——?"

"Never you mind," bade Pine Knot, with a wink. "Me an' this Injun are havin' fun." And—— "Six pony," he added, to Left Hand.

"Me see," grunted Left Hand; and wrapping his blanket about him, stalked away.

The station gong, which was a pan beaten with a spoon, sounded for supper.

"You made him think we were in earnest," said Terry, wrathful, as he hurried in.

"Pshaw, that was jest a bit o' fun," repeated Pine Knot tipsily. "I love fun, an' I love leetle gals, an' leetle boys, too. Got fifteen o' my own."

The supper was antelope steaks, one boiled potato each, bread, mustard, and strong coffee. It had been cooked by the station-man himself, and was served on a bare board table, around which the passengers sat on buffalo-hide stools and up-turned boxes.

But everybody was hungry.

Virgie had dried her eyes. She sat close beside Terry's mother.

"What's that, about Virgie going to be a squaw?" demanded Terry's father.

"Left Hand's going to give six ponies for her," teased Terry.

"No!" wailed Virgie. "I sha'n't be a squaw."

"No; and you don't have to be," comforted Mrs. Richards. And everybody laughed.

"Six ponies is a heap of money to a 'Rapaho," observed the station-keeper.

Virgie ate in a hurry, and was first to the door.

Suddenly she ran back in, and hid behind Mother Richards' skirts.

"He's out there!" she cried. "And he's got six ponies."

That was true. In the dusk Left Hand was standing patiently, holding the hide thongs of six ponies.

CHAPTER III

A LIVELY TIME AT JULESBURG

"HAW, haw!" roared Pine Knot. "That's a joke on the Injun."

"By jiminy, it's too early to laugh!" Sol asserted. "Who engineered that deal? You?"

"He said he did it for fun," answered Terry. "Don't cry, Virgie. You sha'n't be sold."

"You'd best go along to the coach, an' put the gal inside," directed the station-keeper. "These Injuns can act ornery. Some jokes they don't understand."

Sol hastily stepped outside.

"Puckachee (Get out)!" they heard him say to Left Hand.

Mother Richards picked up Virgie, and they all followed. Pine Knot was still sillily chuckling.

"You're a wretch!" scolded Mother Richards at him, over her shoulder.

"Six pony. Take young squaw," alertly uttered Left Hand.

The coach was standing, ready, with six horses again, and with its two great oil lamps lighted. Mother Richards fairly ran past Left Hand, and hustled herself and Virgie inside, to the farthest corner.

"No sell," said Father Richards to Left Hand.
"My girl. No sell."

"Six pony," Left Hand insisted, stepping forward.
"Man and boy say six pony."

"That was a joke, Left Hand," Terry pleaded.

"Huh?" Left Hand glared at him. "No. No joke. Lie." And with surprising quickness he dropped the thongs and sprang at Pine Knot. "You say six pony. They no sell. You lie. Mebbe you pay ten dollar."

Pine Knot swayed and paled; his hand fumbled for his revolver butt. Left Hand fiercely seized his wrist.

"Ten dollar. You pay. No pay, you stay. Make you 'Rapaho squaw. Heap big squaw, do heap work."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Sol. "That's the ticket. Hooray!" He climbed to the box. "All 'board. Time's up."

"Ten dollar," repeated Left Hand, holding Pine Knot. "Ten dollar for lie."

"Hey! You all goin' on an' leave a peaceable citizen to be sculped?" appealed Pine Knot vainly.

"Aren't you to ride inside for the night, Terry?" was calling Mother Richards.

"Can't I ride with Sol?"

"But you'll be cold."

"Just pass him out a blanket, and I'll fix him," invited Sol. "All 'board." He had donned gloves and overcoat.

But they weren't rid of Pine Knot. He had thrust his hand into his trousers pocket, paid his fee, and was lurching for the coach.

"Fust I get robbed of my rightful an' lawful seat," he complained, almost sobbing, "an' now I get robbed by an Injun. All jest 'cause I'm a peaceable citizen an' love leetle gals. I've got twenty leetle gals an' boys o' my own."

Terry gladly grabbed a blanket, and mounted. The brake clanged once more, and the coach lunged forward into the shadowed plains.

Sol settled for his all-night drive, clear to Bijou Junction, sixty miles on, or ninety-five from Denver.

With a buffalo robe over their knees, and the blanket in reserve, Terry was grandly comfortable. The darkness gathered rapidly. The coach lamps shone only as far as the lead team, but they illuminated the sides of the road, and the horses knew the trail well.

And this was great fun, to be lumbering swiftly through the night, with the stars overhead and the eerie sage flashing by.

"Nope; doesn't pay to joke with an Injun in that fashion," observed Sol. "The joke turns wrong end fust. Well, pretty soon we meet the down coach. 'Spect you'll want to stay up and see it. Then where'll you sleep? In the boot, or on top?"

"On top."

"All right. I'll wear the blanket, and you can crawl back and wedge yourself comfort'ble under the buff'ler robe."

A pair of lights appeared ahead. It was the down coach, bound for Denver. With a rush and a single whoop apiece they passed each other. Terry yawned prodigiously after this, and concluded to go to bed.

This was easily done. He stowed his shoes and coat in the boot under the seat (he might have slept there, and he did, later on the trip), and, trading his blanket for the buffalo robe, crawled back upon the coach top. Here he wedged in among the luggage, rolled in the buffalo robe, and stretched out on his back.

Down below, inside the coach, the passengers, wrapped in shawls and blankets and overcoats, sat up all night, and nodded and gurgled, and weren't comfortable at all. But aloft, the air was fresh and the stars shone, and the coach rocked like a cradle, and barricaded by the luggage a fellow couldn't be thrown off. Terry woke only twice: once when the team was being changed at some station, and once into daylight before the coach was pulling into Bijou!

He felt first-rate, but the inside passengers were considerably the worse for wear—Pine Knot the worst of all. Sol stayed at Bijou to sleep, himself, and to take the down coach back to Denver. But after breakfast he obligingly passed Terry and Virgie on to the new driver.

"These two are top passengers for you, Dick," he said; so that was settled.

Julesburg, the end of the Denver division, was still one hundred miles eastward. All that day they trundled down the Platte River, with halts only at the "swing" stations, for change of teams, and at the "home" stations, for meals also. Virgie was afraid to sleep in the dark, outside, but Terry woke up, atop, at Julesburg, in the sunshine.

Distance from Denver, one hundred and ninety-five miles; time, forty-three hours.

Julesburg was a lively place. It was the end of the Denver division of the Overland, and also was a division point of the main Overland between St. Joseph on the Missouri River and Salt Lake of Utah. The stages from the Missouri River crossed the Platte here and turned northwest, for Fort Laramie of "Nebraska" and the South Pass over the Rockies, to Utah. The stages from Salt Lake rolled in by the same route. Passengers for Denver were transferred to the Denver coach.

The C. O. C. & P. P. timecard bore the name "Overland City" instead of Julesburg, on account of Julesburg's bad reputation as a trading station in emigrant days. The emigrants for Oregon and California forded the South Platte here, on their way by the Oregon Trail. There had been wild scenes.

The new name on the timecards made no difference. As "Julesburg" was it known, just the same.

Julesburg had a number of buildings—a station and stable well-built of chinked logs, and a blacksmith shop, and a store.

Everybody from the Denver stage had a good chance to stretch legs, after breakfast, while waiting for the through stage from Salt Lake.

"No, ma'am, I can't promise a thing," was saying a quiet, wiry man to a large woman in hoop-skirts and sunbonnet, carrying a faded, rolled umbrella. "The traffic east is unusually heavy. Every through stage

is crowded. You'll have to wait your turn. That's the best——"

"Wait?" The large woman began to swell. "You little whippersnapper, you tell me to wait? Here I've been a-waitin' all day an' all night." She must have come in from a ranch. "Don't you dare tell me again to 'wait.' I've paid my money and I guess I'm entitled to a seat." Suddenly she clutched her umbrella tighter, and flourished it point first. "Wait?" She jabbed at the quiet, wiry man, and he abruptly retreated a step. "You (poke) tell (poke) me (poke) to wait (poke)? Not *much* (poke), you don't (poke)!"

The quiet, wiry man was backing as fast as he might.

"Very well, madam," he attempted. "I'll see——"

"I don't want you to see. I'll (poke) see for myself (poke). I've got eyes and a tongue (poke). Do I (poke) leave by the next stage (poke)?"

"You do, madam, even if you crowd the driver off onto the wheel team," hastily assured the quiet, wiry man.

"You bet I do!" declared the large woman, glaring about. "I'm some punkins, when I get started."

"By gosh," chuckled the station-keeper. "Fust time I ever knew Jack Slade to back down."

"Oh, that's Jack Slade, is he?" remarked Terry's father.

Terry stared, also. Everybody on the line of the Overland stage knew of the celebrated Jack Slade.

He had been made division superintendent between Julesburg and Rocky Ridge—the Sweetwater Division—on purpose to clean out the tough characters. And he had done it—had shot or hanged a lot of outlaws, horse-thieves, and gun-men. But he didn't look it.

He was of good taut figure—the quick, pantherly kind; weighed maybe one hundred and eighty pounds, without any fat; had a hard, square-jawed, thin-lipped face, smooth-shaven, but unsmiling; prominent cheek bones, like an Indian, and dark slaty eyes; wore ordinary clothes, broad-brimmed black hat, open coat, loose-collared flannel shirt, trousers and high boots, and a revolver.

People said that he was the best revolver shot, off-hand, on the line.

So that was Jack Slade, was it? Terry resolved to write George all about him.

“Yes, gents an' ladies,” the station-keeper kept repeating, in awe. “Fust time I ever knew of Jack Slade backin' down. But I don't blame him.”

The large woman stood firmly planted, her eyes upon the Salt Lake stage road. She had made up her mind.

“We're doubling up, ladies and gentlemen,” announced Slade. “There'll be another stage close after this one now coming.”

“I double up for nobody,” proclaimed the large woman.

“No, ma'am,” agreed Superintendent Slade politely. “You're a whole team in yourself, including the little dog under the wagon.”

The first stage from the west was jammed; but, in

spite of the cries and protests and struggles to keep her out, the large woman resolutely forced herself in, umbrella used bayonet fashion; from the opposite door dived a man, breathless and laughing, and, amidst cheers, clambered atop, where he rode perched perilously on a pile of baggage.

Now it was weary waiting, with the sun hot and nothing to look at except the shallow, muddy Platte, the prairie dogs, and the sage brush. But there was a series of loud yells from the store, and out lurched Pine Knot Ike. He evidently had been busy drinking whiskey.

"Whoopie!" he yelled. "Whar's the pusson who wants to gaze on a genuyine half hoss, half alligator? I'm a howlin', I air! I needs room. Whenever I gets limbered up on rattlesnake pizen, I needs room." He flourished his revolver—Bang! "Whoop! Whar's the man who says I don't ride as I please? Whar's the Injun who tuk my hard-earned ten dollars? (Bang!) I wants a stage. Do I get a stage, so's to fight for my country? I'm Pine Knot Ike, an' I cuts my teeth on a buzz-saw. Whoop!"

But Superintendent Slade was walking directly for him.

"That will do. Not another yap. Get out of sight and stay there."

Pine Knot gasped, astonished.

"Do I hear you speak, stranger?" he asked.

"Yes. You heard me tell you to quit that noise and to get out of sight and stay there. You're alarming the ladies."

Pine Knot leveled his revolver; it wavered, but he leveled it.

"Mebbe you don't know who you're speakin' at, stranger. Mebbe you don't know that those air like to be yore last words. Mebbe you think you're a better man than I am. Say! What might you call yoreself?"

"I'm just Jack Slade, but I'm superintendent of this division, and I'm BOSS of this RANCH! Hands up, quick!"

Mr. Slade's voice had changed abruptly. It rang like a trumpet; and so lightning fast that the eye had not followed, his own revolver was out, and poised at his hip, pointed straight in line with Pine Knot.

Up rose Pine Knot's two hands; his bushy jaw fell.

"You got the drop on me, Mr. Slade. I didn't know 'twas you, Mr. Slade. 'Deed I didn't, Mr. Slade."

"Higher! Put 'em up higher!"

"I'm a peaceable man, Mr. Slade. I has my little fun, occasional. But I'll leave it to these ladies and gents if I'm not the peacefulest, best-natured——"

Bang!

"Wow!" Pine Knot's revolver flew wide, whirling over and over, and Pine Knot danced and wrung his fingers desperately. Mr. Slade had neatly shot it out of his hand, but was not done.

"Steady! Put up those hands. Stand right where you are." He deliberately backed away twenty paces. "Kindly turn exactly sideways. Steady now. Don't

move a fraction of an inch or you're a dead man."

"You aren't going to kill me, Mr. Slade? Please don't, Mr. Slade. You wouldn't kill a peaceable citizen, who doesn't harm a fly. I've a large family, Mr. Slade. Twenty leetle boys an' gals——"

"Steady!" bade Mr. Slade. "I'll unbutton that coat for you, but I'll have to shoot pretty close." Bang!

"Wow!" cried Pine Knot, and sprang into the air. The top button of his coat had been snipped off as slick as the head from a daisy.

"Stand where you are. Turn sideways again. Now for the second button." Bang!

"Don't that do, Mr. Slade?" whined Pine Knot. "I'm a pore man, an' these buttons cost money."

But—bang!

"Now you get out of sight, or I'll begin on your trousers," said Mr. Slade crisply. "Vamose! You go into that store, tell the storekeeper to give you a set of new buttons, and don't you come out till you've sewed them on. You understand?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Slade, sir," meekly acknowledged Pine Knot; and, thoroughly sobered, he scuttled for the store; paused only long enough to rescue his revolver, and continued on hands and knees, not daring to straighten up!

"Slade could have killed him as easy as not," remarked the station-keeper. "But he's a gentleman, an' doesn't like to scare the ladies."

"The stage is due," announced Mr. Slade, leisurely

walking back. "I regret this little scene, but we must have order on the line. You'll find plenty of room in this coach, I think."

Pine Knot evidently was still sewing on his buttons, for he did not reappear, and the passengers voted it good riddance.

CHAPTER IV

TERRY SAVES THE DAY

AFTER the excitement at Julesburg, Virgie decided to stay close to the grown people; so now she was riding inside. But there was a third person on the box, along with Terry and the driver.

He was a wiry, well-built boy, scarcely older than Terry, with long, rich brown hair and steady brown eyes. He wore regular frontier costume of broad-brimmed black hat, flannel shirt, and trousers tucked into cowhide boots, and a revolver at his waist. He bore himself with the air of a man, and seemed well known to the driver.

Terry sat in the middle, and had plenty of room. Pretty soon the driver flicked his lash again, and spoke to Terry.

"What might they call you, youngster?"

"Terry Richards."

"Where you from?"

"Denver."

"Well, shake hands with Billy Cody. Billy's been riding pony express up on the Sweetwater division beyond Laramie."

By gracious, so he had! His name was as famous,

out hereabouts, as that of Jack Slade. He had started in at pony express when he was only fifteen; now he was sixteen and had been riding the same as a man, on one of the most dangerous stretches of the Salt Lake route. His adventures had been printed in the papers—youngest rider on the trail, and all grit.

Terry felt his eyes popping; but Billy Cody only grinned at him and shook hands without a word of brag.

"Yes," he said. "I rode a little, and tended stock at division headquarters. Reckon I'm due at home now. Where you bound for? Going through?"

"Not quite. We have a ranch in the Big Blue Valley in Kansas, and I guess we'll stop off there, first. But my father's going to Leavenworth to enlist."

"So am I," declared Billy Cody. "I mean to see this war through. Maybe they'll think I'm too young for soldiering, but I can get a recommend from the stage company that I'm a sure-'nough scout. I can ride and I can shoot."

"You're a sure-'nough scout, all right," echoed the driver. "Suppose you'll go to Leavenworth, yourself."

"Yes. Want to see my mother, too. I haven't been home for about a year."

"You two fellows are sort of neighbors, ain't you?" queried the stage driver.

"Sort of. He says he lived on the Big Blue. Our place is in the Grasshopper Valley, quite a piece east. I reckon we never met up."

"No," ventured Terry. "We left Kansas and went

to mining in the Gregory Diggin's. But I've heard of you."

From Julesburg the Overland stage road followed down along the south bank of the Platte River, through southern Nebraska, two hundred miles to Fort Kearney. At Fort Kearney it cut southeast, two hundred and fifty more miles to St. Joe, Missouri, on the Missouri River. St. Joe was the end of the trail, in the east.

So Terry had about four hundred and fifty miles yet, of day and night travel.

The staunch Concord bowled merrily, with now and again a stretch of hard pulling in sand and through wash-outs. Every ten or fifteen miles the team was changed—sometimes there were four horses or mules and sometimes six. That depended upon the state of the road ahead. The home stations, for meals, were sandwiched in between the regular swing stations, where the stops were made only for fresh teams.

Billy Cody and the drivers talked briefly, but what they said was mighty interesting. This night Billy slept sitting up on the driver's box. Terry crawled back amidst the baggage on top.

The road was fairly level, although the drivers declared that the coach was going down hill, with every mile into the east. It was a bare, monotonous road, but fascinating just the same. Antelope were constantly in sight, whisking their white rumps in flight or staring motionless. Buffalo were likely to be seen, by good luck. Indians were possible. And the wagon

trains of bull-whacker freight outfits and of emigrants seemed never ending.

These had to give the right-of-way to the stage. The stage forged straight on, regardless.

"There he comes," remarked Billy Cody, on the morning of the second day, pointing before.

"Who?"

"Pony Express."

"He" was a mere dot, far down the road; but he enlarged rapidly. The driver and Billy and Terry watched intent. Lickity-split the rider came on, bolting like an arrow through the startled emigrant and freighter outfits in his path. Their cheers pursued him.

Now he was charging for the coach—his horse running as fast as any deer. Billy and the driver threw up their hand in greeting, but he had passed so quickly that scarce more than a glimpse of him was to be had.

However, he was a small, slim man, in tightly fitting clothes, on a skeleton saddle. He rode like a jockey.

"That was Little Yank," quoth the driver. "He covers about a hundred miles, that lad."

"He was a-going," said Billy Cody shortly. "Any man who rides a hundred miles, at Pony Express, sure earns his money."

"His pay's a hundred a month, that's all," said the driver. "You got more than that, didn't you, Billy?"

"Yes; they raised me to a hundred and fifty, account the Injuns being bad. This sort of riding soon shakes the joints loose. One time I had to ride three hundred and twenty miles without a rest."

"So I heard tell. That's the record, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. There are men who could beat it, I guess."

At Midway, which was supposed to be half way between the Missouri River and Denver, one of the jolliest of the drivers climbed aboard.

His name proved to be Bill Trotter, and he was somewhat of a wag. For as he drew on his gloves, after dinner, he called the attention of the passengers to the team.

"Do you know, ladies and gents, that these are remarkable animals?"

"How so?" asked somebody. "What's remarkable about them?"

"You see that leader on the near side? Just cast your eye over him. I reckon there are men who'd give a thousand dollars to see a hoss like that!"

"You don't say! Why?"

"'Cause they're blind," answered Bill.

"Haw, haw!" roared the station-keeper.

"I never fail to catch somebody with that bait," observed Bill, much satisfied. "Pretty soon I'll have to think up a new one, though. All 'board!"

"The only new one I know," he continued, to Billy Cody and Terry, as the stage leaped forward behind the fresh team, "is the new name for the C. O. C. & P. P. Did you ever hear it? Guess not, 'cause I invented it only yesterday."

"No; what is it, Bill?"

"C. O. C. & P. P. used to mean Central Overland California & Pike's Peak, but I've changed that. Now

it means 'Clean Out of Cash & Poor Pay.' We're distributing a little pome as we go along, too. Dunno who invented it.

“‘On or about the first of May
The boys would like to have their pay;
If not paid by that day,
The stock along the road may stray!’

When it gets to St. Joe it'll make the company do a bit of hard thinking.”

“Are things so bad as that, Bill?”

“Well, in my opinion, the Pony Express is busting the stage. The company spent \$100,000 before a hoof stirred, in buying hosses and building stations and all that; and now their expenses run up to \$30,000 a month. They don't take in anywhere near that, and the telegraph'll be through to Salt Lake in a year. It'll carry news cheaper and faster than the Pony Express.”

“Then the Express'll have to quit,” mused Billy Cody. “Hope Mr. Russell and Mr. Majors don't go under, too. They're fine men. They've treated me mighty well.”

“Stage employees can't live on promises,” said Bill Trotter. “The men have got to have their pay, or ‘the stock along the road may stray.’ I don't reckon that Messrs. Russell, Majors & Waddell ever expected to cash in big on the Pony Express. They started it to show the Government that a trail across continent could be kept open the year round, so they'd get the

mail contract for the stage line—get it away from the Butterfield Southern route, the northern route being shorter. But I guess they've bit off more'n they can chew. G'lang, you!" And Bill cracked his lash.

"Well, the Pony Express will come in powerful handy to carry the war news," remarked Billy.

And so it did.

Mr. Trotter had a long "stage" of the sixty-five miles between Midway and Fort Kearney. In many stretches the road was fine, and he hit a spanking pace of fourteen and fifteen miles an hour. That was glorious.

The country was getting more fertile and better settled by ranches. The meals were cheaper, too; seventy-five cents, or "six bits," instead of a dollar. The swing stations were still of hewn or faced cedar logs, or of prairie sod laid like bricks; but the home stations were changing from the rough pine boards, nailed up-right, to logs hauled from the bottom lands.

It was going to be a fine moonlight night, until Driver Trotter cocked his eye to the south. All the horizon there was a jetty black, rising swiftly.

"Looks like a bit of trouble coming," he said. "If you fellows stay up here you're liable to get wet."

"Not for me," alertly answered Billy Cody. "I'll sandwich in below."

"All right," chuckled Driver Trotter. "You'll be about as welcome there as an extra groom at a wedding. How about you, youngster?"

"I'd rather stay on the box," replied Terry.

"You can crawl in the boot when you get enough.

Gee whillikens, look at her come! Guess I'd better light those lamps. Hold the lines a minute." Bill jammed on the brakes, passed the lines to Terry, and swung off.

Billy Cody swung off, too, to enter the coach. Terry sat on the box with the lines of the four-mule team in his fingers. While the lamps were being lighted, his mother called up anxiously.

"Terry! Aren't you coming inside?"

"No'm. I'll crawl in the boot, under the seat."

"Will you be safe there? It looks like a dreadful storm."

"I'll sit right atop of him, ma'am," spoke Driver Trotter. "And as long as I don't melt or blow away I'll hold him down."

The passengers inside the coach were hastily buckling the leather curtains and making snug. Billy Cody had squeezed in with a word of apology. By the time Bill had lighted the two great oil lamps, the jetty black pall had mounted into the sky overhead. Sensing the storm, the mules had grown restive. Bill climbed to the box, took the lines, kicked the brake loose, and the team leaped forward.

"Six miles to go yet, and five minutes to do it in. Whoopee! We don't stand as good a show as a mud-turtle."

The mules were lively, but the storm was livelier. The moon had been swallowed up, and so had the first stars, except to the far north. Suddenly the breeze soughed stronger and stronger—there was a roar and a rattle—the darkness deepened—Bill shouted some-

thing and pulled the buffalo robe higher—and the storm arrived.

It came as a line of dense white.

Hail!

“Suffering cats!” Bill hunched under his slouch hat, into the buffalo robe. The hail was mixed with a deluge of rain, the darkness was inky. Terry’s courage vanished, and he vanished also—slipping from the seat and boring his way behind the curtain, into the boot underneath the seat.

Already the mules were plunging and cavorting, as the hail stones stung them. The stones were as large as hazel nuts and musket balls. They arrived with the speed of musket balls, too, driven by a fierce gale. They drummed like a trip hammer upon the coach side and top.

Curled in the close boot, Terry listened. He was obliged to brace himself, for the coach was rocking and swaying and tilting. He could not see an inch; he could only feel, and hear, and guess.

He guessed that Driver Trotter was having a hard time. By the way in which the coach jolted, the mules were frantic. The wind blew with force enough to tilt the coach on two wheels. He was tossed and shaken, and several times he was wellnigh thrown through the curtain.

Wow! What was that? Down with a thump lurched the coach and went bumpity-bump, careening frightfully. Out slid Terry, clutching in vain, until he grabbed Bill’s braced legs. He just managed to save himself from pitching overboard entirely.

"Wheel off!" gasped Driver Trotter, above him. "Brake busted. If I could only get to those mules' heads——"

The passengers inside were shouting wildly. Terry did not pause an instant. Something had to be done, or the coach would capsize. The mules seemed to be running in a circle, with the axle dragging.

He squirmed from Bill's legs, and dived blindly for the ground; landed sprawling, amidst the hail and rain and darkness. The coach lights were gone, their glass shattered by the hailstones. Where he was, when he landed, Terry did not exactly know; but he picked himself up, and ran, staggering and feeling, for the mules.

That was dangerous, too; he stood a good chance of being knocked over and stepped on. First he missed the whole team. Then, blundering about, he collided with a mule and was sent headlong into the mud. Whew! Try again. Next time he hung on; and, flung hither-thither, he worked along, hanging to the harness, until he felt the bit.

Hurrah! There he was, at the bits of the lead team. He clung fast, sometimes with his legs swinging. He had lost his hat; the hail and rain lashed his head and face, but the mules did not shake him off. The team slowed; he pulled them down to a standstill.

"I got 'em!"

"Hey! Are you all right?" yelled Bill.

"I got 'em, Bill!"

"Hang hard, then."

As suddenly as it had come, the storm left. The

stars shone in the sky, behind the retreating line of black. The mules waited, hunched and trembling, for further orders. Driver Bill climbed down from his box; the coach door opened and the passengers boiled out.

"You can let loose," said Driver Bill to Terry. "Durn that brake. One more turn and they'd have upset us. Reckon you saved the bacon. I'd like to catch the man who left that nut loose."

Billy Cody was the first of the passengers.

"Where's your wheel? That's a nice ride to give people who are trying to sleep! I've been trying to get out for half an hour, but the door was full of legs and heads."

"Anybody hurt, inside?"

"No. Anybody hurt out here?"

"Terry! Where are you? Are you hurt?" That was Terry's mother.

"No, ma'am. Not a bit. Just muddy, is all."

"Come here and let me see."

"It's only mud, Ma. We've got to find the wheel."

"Wait till I light one of these here lamps," quoth Driver Bill. "And let me tell you, ladies and gents, that if this lad hadn't hung onto these mules' heads, you'd all been into the mud. He's pure grit. He was off quicker'n Jack Robinson, and did as well as Billy Cody could."

After using several matches, Bill lighted one of the lamps. Terry and the men scouted about for the wheel and nut. They found both by following the coach tracks around and around.

The coach was unloaded and hoisted to a level, and blocked, to receive the wheel again.

"We'll have to stop awhile at the station ahead," quoth Driver Bill. "This axle needs straightening. It's cocked up like a pug nose."

Unloading the coach, adjusting the wheel, and loading the coach, took considerable time, and also considerable work. Now Terry was warm, even if muddy.

"Won't you ride inside, Terry?" queried his mother. "We'll make room."

"Can't I stay on the box? I'll wrap up."

"Oh, Terry!"

"Let him stay, ma'am, if you please," proposed Bill. "I'll give him the buff'lo robe. I need a good man alongside me. 'Tisn't far to the station."

Words like that would warm any boy. The buffalo robe did the rest. While the coach, lumbering lamely, splashed on, Terry began to doze. By the time the station was reached, he could scarcely open his eyes. The station agent hustled to prepare space for shake-downs on the floor and in the stable. Nobody waited for coffee or anything else, but all went to bed, while the coach was being repaired.

Virgie and Terry's mother and the other women had the best places. Mr. Richards slept in one spot and Terry in another. They all were glad to be here.

After a rough but ready breakfast, Bill Trotter drove them on, through a fine morning, to Fort Kearney, in southeastern Nebraska Territory. This was almost two-thirds of the distance on the Overland Trail from Denver.

Here the trail split; one fork followed down along the Platte, northeasterly, for Omaha. That was an emigrant trail. The other fork, which was the main stage road, left the Platte and dipped southeastwardly into Kansas, for the end of the line at St. Joseph across the Missouri River.

Bill Trotter quit at Fort Kearney to lie by. A driver by the name of Bob Hodge took the lines. Bob Hodge proved to be an interesting man, too.

Withal, he was a dashing sort of a dandy. The harness of his team was jingly with many ivory rings, and was studded with brass. The stock of his whip was silver inlaid, and the lash was silk-tasseled. He wore an ornamental fringed buckskin suit, and carried a copper bugle.

Along the way, he blew at everything and everybody sighted; and when approaching a station he lilted a gay tune, which he said was "Come Out of the Wilderness." He much amused Virgie, who finally had changed from the inside seat to a top seat amidst the luggage. That was because she was getting near Kansas, and felt safe.

Billy Cody was still aboard—on the box again, with Terry and the driver.

At Rock Creek swing station he seemed to know the station-keeper very well. The station-keeper was a lithe, graceful, quick man, six feet tall, and sinewy, with handsome face and long curling golden-brown hair.

He limped as he moved; appeared to be off a sick

bed. His cheek and forehead bore large scars, freshly healed.

He wore two ivory-handled revolvers.

"Hello, Bill."

"Hello, Billy. Coming home?"

"Yes. How you feeling now?"

"Chipper as an Injun at a dog feast."

"What's the news, Bill?"

"Well, plenty of work for good men and true. How far you going?"

"To Leavenworth. I mean to enlist."

"All right. I'll see you later, I reckon."

"That's 'Wild Bill' Hickok," remarked Billy Cody to Terry, when the coach had started on. "The best friend I've got, and the best pistol shot, with either hand, on the plains."

"Has he been in a fight?"

"You might call it that. He's the man who licked the McCandlass gang last winter. There were only ten of 'em who tried to lift the stage stock at the station, when Bill was alone. They fetched their bowie-knives and pistols, but after the tussel there were only two of 'em—and Bill. He was born 'James'; 'Wild Bill' is his name, since the fracas. I guess you don't live far beyond here. He's station agent at Rock Creek, and if ever you folks need a friend, you send word to him. He'll come, if he has to crawl."

"We sure will," promised Terry.

At Rock Creek station the stage had crossed into northern Kansas.

"Next station is ours, Terry," called up Terry's father.

So it was. They piled off and tumbled out. Terry waved good-bye to Billy Cody—who was to be known, some day, as Buffalo Bill. Mr. Richards hired a horse to go down to the ranch. Early in the morning he was back again with a wagon, and they all rode "home."

CHAPTER V

"WILD BILL" HELPS OUT

THE President had called for volunteers to serve three years. Father Richards was likely to be gone a long time, so, of course, he felt anxious to get Mother Richards and Terry and Virgie well settled. But the ranch had been abused; it did not look even livable. Neighbors were few and far between.

Father Richards found a way, though. From a trip to Leavenworth he hurried back, much pleased.

"I think I've arranged things nicely," he announced. "I've traded for a half section north. The stage road runs right through the end of it. How would you like to live on the stage road and run a store?"

"Ralph!" gasped Terry's mother. "Are you in earnest?"

But Terry cheered, and Virgie clapped her hands. Who wouldn't like to have the Overland Stage road pass one's door, and the coaches stop there sometimes, bringing all kinds of people from east and west?

"Yes, I'm in earnest. You can't stay here. This country will be full of raiders and bush-whackers. On the stage road you'll be safer, and have plenty of company. There's a fairly good house and stable, and a

sort of store; chickens and a couple of cows; and a swing station down the road to the east. I thought that if we put in a few more groceries, then you and Terry and Virgie might sell them, and butter and eggs and garden stuff to the emigrants; and no doubt the stages would let their passengers stop off a minute or two, now and again. Then I'd feel safer about you, and wouldn't worry."

"We'll try," Mother Richards bravely promised.

They moved to the new place the very next day. This week Father Richards left them. He had enlisted, and was due to report.

Although they missed him very much, they did not have time for being lonesome. What with tending the store and the garden and the cows and the chickens, and making butter and answering the questions of the travelers, there was work from early morning until late at night.

It was a lively road. "Overlanders," or emigrant outfits, of white-hooded wagons drawn by one or two spans of oxen, and freighters, with huge canvas-topped Conestogas and teams of six, eight and ten "bulls" guided by booted "bull-whackers," were constantly passing, west bound.

The Pony Express riders, one from the east and one from the west, dashed along, right by the house and store, every day. They appeared precisely on the dot—you might set the clock by them. Virgie always watched for them, and waved, and they waved back. At the stage swing station, a few miles east, Terry learned who they were on this run; and several times

he was at the station when they changed horses in a twinkling.

There was a dusty Overland coach early in the morning, from the Missouri River, and another, at noon, from Denver and Salt Lake. The drivers back and forth on the run were "Teddy" Nichols and Lew Hill, pleasant men, both.

When they had time to spare they were apt to stop at the "Richards' place" and allow the passengers five or ten minutes for buying things to eat. They and the passengers made much of Virgie, because she was a girl.

The emigrants and freighters sometimes bought stuff, also; and by selling butter and eggs and vegetables and groceries, the "Richards' place" did finely.

Terry grew to know the Pony Express riders and the stage drivers so well by name or by sight that he rather felt as though he was a C. O. C. & P. P. man himself. When he was at the swing station, east, once in a while he was permitted to hand up the bunch of lines to the driver; and usually he was given a free ride home. Having made the Overland trip from Denver, on the driver's box, and done "as well as Billy Cody," in the night when the wheel came off, he felt like a veteran.

"Wild Bill" Hickok stopped off, once or twice, on his way from or to Rock Creek. A very quiet, polite man was this "Wild Bill," even though a terrific fighter. He said that Billy Cody had asked him to keep an eye on the Richards "outfit."

"I'm about to leave for Denver, and get a spell of

mountain air to set me on my feet," added "Wild Bill." "But if I can be of any service, just send the word along. Any friend of Billy Cody's is a friend of mine."

"There won't be any danger around here, will there?" asked Terry's mother.

"I wouldn't say no, ma'am. The war's liable to give a lot of lawless characters a good excuse to turn themselves loose on their own account. Just keep a stiff upper lip; they're mostly cowards, and if any of them start to trouble you, you've got a right gritty boy, here, to act as your man. Can you handle a six-shooter, youngster?"

"A little, but I'm not much good," confessed Terry.

"Here's my gun. Suppose you show how good. That tin can yonder needs a hole right through the end."

While Virgie held her ears, Terry squinted long and blazed away. He hit the ground, but missed the can. "Wild Bill" laughed easily.

"If that can had been alive it would have died of old age while you were aiming," he said. "If it had been a man, he'd have walked up on you and hit you over the head with a club. May I give your boy a few lessons, ma'am?"

"But I don't want him to be a shooter," objected Terry's mother. "A gun is too dangerous. He might hurt himself or somebody else."

"In my opinion, if you'll pardon me, ma'am, for speaking it," politely answered "Wild Bill," "every boy and man ought to know how to shoot, and shoot

hard. There come times when we may have to protect ourselves and like as not other people, to the limit, and when a gun is the only argument. I reckon this boy can lick his weight and a bit over, and no gentleman would lay hands on him. But the country's full of bullies and bruisers, and a gun is the thing they respect. It makes the runt who can shoot straight as big as the biggest two-hander that ever wore boots. So I guess I'd better give your boy a few lessons. Some day you may thank me. Anyway, they won't do him harm."

"Now," continued "Wild Bill" to Terry, "you'll never see a good quick shot with a pistol taking aim. He has his aim taken before his gun is out, just like you point your finger. He shoots with both eyes open, and he shoots by feel, and the bullet goes to the spot that he's looking at. It's all the same as throwing a rock. While your pistol's coming up out of the scabbard or wherever you carry it, you want to make up your mind where you're going to plant the bullet, and the instant you get the feel let drive. Don't wait. When you're ready to shoot, then shoot. And don't shoot till you are ready. But the quicker you're ready the better."

"I'd like to have you show me," invited Terry.

"Is there any little job of shooting that you'd like to suggest, ma'am?" queried "Wild Bill" to Mother Richards.

"Yes," said Mother Richards promptly. "I wish you'd shoot that rooster. He's running wild—he chases all the other roosters and is only fit to be eaten,

but we can't catch him. Can you kill him without hurting him?"

"I can cut his head off, ma'am, the same as you would with an axe."

"From here?" demanded Terry.

The rooster (a nuisance) was fully thirty yards away, strutting about across the road. A smile on his lips, "Wild Bill" eyed him a moment, waiting. Virgie held her ears again. The rooster halted, with head up; out from his left holster "Wild Bill" whipped his other revolver, barely leveled it from his thigh, and fired—"Bang!" The rooster collapsed and went fluttering over and over, without a head.

"I declare!" exclaimed Mother Richards. "I believe you did! We've been wanting that rooster killed for ever so long."

"Gee whillikens!" stammered Terry. "How'd you do it?"

"I'd made up my mind, and the bullet went where I told it to go. Savvy? While your mother's cleaning the chicken, let's spend a few rounds."

"Wild Bill" was a wizard. He could hit a silver dime at twenty yards, and drive a cork into a bottle without breaking the neck, so that the compressed air blew the bottom out of the bottle itself. But he had Terry do most of the shooting, while he coached.

When he rode away, he left the ivory-handled revolver for Terry to practice with until he, "Wild Bill," came back again. And Terry did practice, in spare moments, so that the "Richards' place" sounded like a Fourth of July, old-style.

He didn't equal "Wild' Bill"—who, as Billy Cody and others said, was the best pistol shot on the plains, and moreover rarely shot except in self defense; but he got used to the noise and to drawing quickly.

"If 'Wild Bill' hadn't been a crack shot, those ten bush-whackers would have killed him and stolen all the stage stock," he explained, to excuse himself to his mother and Virgie. "The same thing might happen to us, while pa isn't here."

Meanwhile, events occurred.

First, in July, some big news broke. The Overland stages were to run clear through to California. Yes, sir. The Pony Express had shown that the route was all right, winter and summer; and now Russell, Majors & Waddell, who owned the Pony Express and the C. O. C. & P. P. stage line to Salt Lake, had taken the Government mail contract for across continent, from St. Joe on the Missouri to Placerville beyond the Sierra Nevada mountains in California, at \$1,000,000 a year for four years; distance, 1,920 miles; time, seventeen days and a quarter; fare, \$225. The "Pike's Peak" part of the name was dropped. The name to be used was "Central Overland California Route."

A coach left either end every day. That was a tremendous trip. From St. Joe the passengers rode to Salt Lake by the C. O. C. & P. P. Express Company line; from Salt Lake to Virginia City in Nevada they rode by the Overland Mail Company line, which before the war had run from St. Louis through New Mexico and Arizona to San Diego of California; from Virginia City they rode into northern California by

the famous Pioneer Stage line of the gold-seekers' trail.

The through trip seemed to increase travel. The coaches that stopped at the "Richards' place" were always full. There were people from the far east and people from the far west. Toward the last of July an especially odd set stopped.

They were three, by themselves, on a coach half filled inside with mail sacks, and piled high fore and aft with other sacks. They came in gaily riding atop, in their red flannel undershirts, with their hats tied on by bandanna handkerchiefs under their chins, and their stockinged feet hanging over the rail, and each man puffing a pipe.

One of them, a bushy-black-haired man with an unruly straggling mustache and a pair of twinkling eyes, hastily donned his coat and clambered down. He untied his handkerchief and bared his head to Terry's mother.

"Madam, we are traveling with four pounds of United States laws, six pounds of unabridged dictionary, and five pounds of smoking tobacco," he said. "Have you anything a little less dry?"

"We've got some soda water," piped Virgie, excited.

"How much?" queried the bushy-headed man.

"Two cases," answered Terry's mother.

"Taken!" cheered the bushy-headed man. "One case for inside passage and the other for outside. Throw down my boots," he called up. "Throw down yours, too." And he added, to Terry's mother: "When I tackle a case of soda water I always like to

stand in plenty of boots. Then none of the stuff gets away from me."

Down piled the two others; and amidst much hilarity the three entered the store. Driver Teddy Nichols, waiting, scratched his head and grinned at Terry.

"That's the greatest outfit I've had yet. They've been riding all in their underclothes, on top, except when I told 'em there was a woman ahead, by the road. They say they're privileged characters, because they're appearing 'next to reading matter.' Haw! haw! I've got twenty-five hundred pounds of three days' delayed mail on that coach—twenty-five hundred pounds. They sleep on it, half-way to the roof, and the dictionary barks them considerable when it flies around in the dark. Yes, sir; they're taking a big dictionary and some volumes of United States statutes, and a heap of smoking tobacco, a little pistol with a ball 'bout the size of a split pea, and another with six barrels that all go off at once.

"The fellow who got down first is named Clemens—Sam Clemens. The slight-built fellow is his brother. He's new secretary of Nevady Territory. That's where they're both going. Third fellow's name is Bemis. He's booked through. Oh, they're a lively bunch. But Sam's the worst—up to all sorts of tricks."

The three travelers came out, lugging all the soda water that they could carry in their arms and pockets. This they stowed aboard. The man named Sam Clemens noted Terry's ivory-handled revolver—

"Wild Bill's" trained gun. Terry wore this all day, in regular frontier fashion.

"Can you do execution with that?" demanded Mr. Clemens.

"Pretty good. I'm learning," replied Terry.

"Then you take my advice," said Mr. Clemens, in sly, confidential tone. "You see that man who's not quite so handsome as I am? Not my brother, but the other man. You trade guns with him. That gun he has is a humdinger. He shot at the two-spot of spades with it, and it fetched a mule. All you have to do is to turn it loose on the landscape and follow it with a wagon to collect the damages before somebody else is there to collect them first."

"Haw haw!" laughed Driver Nichols.

The stage rolled on, with the three men atop singing cheerfully and each waving a bottle of the soda water.

They got through all right; for in after years Sam Clemens, the joker, took the name of Mark Twain and wrote a book about his trip.

There were other interesting travelers, too, almost daily. And in October who should come through, from the west, but Bill Trotter. He saw Terry, and whooped gladly at him.

"Where you going, Bill?"

"Back to the States for a high old time. Hooray! I wondered if I'd meet up with you."

Bill stopped over, one stage, to visit.

"You see, the stage company's been saving up my money for me, and I haven't had a chance to spend it,"

he explained. "That poem didn't work, exactly. But now the boys are all going to get paid off, 'cause the old company's busted, just as I told you it would, and the new boss is a ring-tail snorter."

"Who is it, Bill?"

"Name's Holladay—Ben Holladay. He made his pile trading out of Missouri across the plains, and built himself a sort of palace out yonder in New York, but the boys who know him say he's all right. He's been lending to the Overland, and now he's taken it over, lock, stock and barrel. They say he'll make a gilt-edge road out of it. He's going to refit it with new hosses and coaches and branch out generally. He's a one-hundred-cents-on-the-dollar kind of a man. The Pony Express is about to quit, so he won't have to carry that on his shoulders."

"When will it quit?"

"This month, sure. The telegraph line's almost to Salt Lake. As soon as connection's made there, the Express won't have any reason to live. The stages carry most of the mail, anyhow, and the telegraph will take care of the dispatches."

When Driver Trotter left, the next day, he announced that for one thing he intended to celebrate by buying out a whole playhouse and having the show all to himself. And that was exactly what he did, in Atchison.

At the end of the month the new stage-line owner, Mr. Holladay, whirled past the ranch, going like a streak. He was riding in a special coach, with a negro

servant and the general agent, Mr. Otis, also of New York, on a tour of inspection. Teddy Nichols said that they left a streak of dust clear across to the mountains.

CHAPTER VI

A BREAK-UP ALL 'ROUND

"TERRY! Oh, Terry! Come quick!"

The winter had passed; it was an April day, and that was his mother's voice calling with sudden appeal from the store doorway.

The west-bound stage had left a small package of mail, from the way-sack. The stage carried a number of mail sacks: for Denver, for Salt Lake, for Nevada, for Sacramento and San Francisco of California. And there was a way-sack, to be opened at several of the post-offices between.

The "Kansas" package left at the ranch did not amount to much, in size, but it was important because it usually brought war news in the shape of soldiers' letters and of papers. Terry had lingered a moment to see whether there was a letter from his father; but there wasn't, this time, so he had hustled out again to finish up a job of work.

Now his mother called him as if she was frightened. He bolted to her.

"Your father's been wounded, Terry!" she cried. "I've a letter about it—from a nurse in a hospital. He's near Washington. What shall we do?"

Virgie began to cry. Terry felt himself turn pale.

"Is he badly hurt, Ma?"

"I'm afraid so. The letter doesn't say how badly. But somebody else wrote it, you see. He couldn't. What had we better do? Oh, Terry! We ought to be with him."

"You go, Ma."

"And leave you here, alone?"

"Of course. I can get along fine."

"I'll stay, too," Virgie spoke up. "And help. I'll tend the store and the chickens."

Virgie was a little brick.

"You two children! How could you manage? Wouldn't you be afraid?"

"Aw, we aren't children, are we, Virgie!" objected Terry. "We can do everything, as well as anybody else. There's only the cows and the chickens and the butter and the store. The mail's nothing. And Virgie and I can cook enough for us. What's there to be afraid of, either? I'm as good as a man, with 'Wild Bill's' gun. I can hit a tin can every time, as quick as a wink, with either hand—except when sometimes I miss. You go, will you? Pa'll get well, if you nurse him. I know he will. Don't you worry about Virgie and me. There won't any bush-whackers tackle *us*!"

"No. Terry'd shoot 'em and I'd hit 'em with a broom," declared Virgie.

"Well, I ought to go. I'll try not to worry. If bush-whackers or other bad characters come, you let

them do as they please. I'd rather they'd take everything than have you or Virgie hurt."

"Huh!" scoffed Terry. "They won't come up this far. 'Wild Bill' cleaned 'em out too slick when they tried Rock Creek. If they do come, and see me with 'Wild Bill's' pistol, they'll run scooting."

So go his mother did, the very next day, by east-bound stage, to Atchison on the Missouri River, where the railroad began.

Were Father Richards not lying wounded somewhere, and Mother Richards hurrying to his side, it would have been fun to be left for a while as boss of the ranch station: storekeeper, postmaster, and everything.

The Pony Express had quit, but the stages passed quite regularly, there were the freighters and the emigrants, and the road was in use a great part of the day.

Ben Holladay, the stage king (that was what people called him), had put a lot of vim into the Overland. "Overland Stage Line" he had renamed it. Bunches of fresh horses, the best to be bought, were being sent out to the stations; new stations were being located, brand new coaches, painted red, larger than the old ones, trundled through every day or two; and the old coaches were being painted red also. Atchison, on the west side of the Missouri, below St. Joe, was now the starting point.

It was said that he was spending thousands of dollars, and was planning branch lines into the north and elsewhere. He made another trip of inspection, this

spring—in a special coach, with his negro servant and Mr. George K. Otis, the general superintendent. Traveled full speed again; went clear through to California in only a little over fourteen days—three days less than schedule. That was his style. Horses and drivers had to be ready.

The Indians had not bothered the line much, yet, during the war. Denver was safe, too, so far. Harry was still riding express, to bring the newspaper dispatches taken off the wire at Julesburg. George's father had enlisted with Colorado troops, and had been in a battle in New Mexico, to stop the Confederate soldiers from marching farther north.

South of Kansas, also, there had been some fighting, but nobody expected that the Confederate soldiers would be able to get very far into Kansas itself. The main danger was from the bush-whackers. These were lawless bands who seemed more bent upon stealing stock and damaging property than upon defending any flag. They roamed about, regardless, but they had not raided the stage line since "Wild Bill" had settled their hash, at Rock Creek.

Terry and Virgie were too busy to waste thought by fearing "bush-whackers." They were doing the best they could, and holding up their end in fine shape. One letter had come from Mother Richards; she had arrived at Father Richard's bedside, and he was very badly wounded, but he would get well, now. The sight of her had been the medicine that he needed.

Terry had written, and Virgie had added a postscript, telling her to stay as long as she wanted to.

They were getting along all right. The chickens were laying and the cows were giving more milk, and the garden was growing fast, and business was bully.

Terry was glad that he sent that kind of a letter, for while it was on its way the situation at the ranch changed in a jiffy. This is what happened:

He had finished milking, and had driven the cows out to pasture, and on the old horse was riding back, to supper. It was a lonesome evening. When he came out of a little swale and in sight of the stage road again, it appeared all deserted; not a moving figure upon it.

Fussing with the cows, and stopping to repair a piece of fence, he had been gone quite a while. Now the smoke was curling from the house chimney, as sign that Virgie was starting supper. She had become a splendid little helper—could cook and make beds and keep house better than he. And she tended to the store, too. Nobody tried to cheat her.

But see! Some people had stopped at the store. As he swung around, for more of a front view, he noted horses standing, and men moving, in the twilight. There were six or eight—they seemed very busy—he thought that he heard Virgie screaming—the men were trying to get in, weren't they? By jiminy! Bush-whackers, or robbers!

Terry spurred his horse; then he checked him. His heart rose into his throat. He thought fast. Now he could see plainly. The men had just battered in the door; they were carrying things out; where was Virgie?

He might ride for help, and get it quick. The station of the stage line was only a few miles east; he might ride there like lightning, and get the men; but first, where was Virgie? He couldn't leave Virgie.

Now he saw her—and he plunged in his spurs and tore for the house. Brave little Virgie! She had a broom, just as she had said she would have, and was beating right and left, trying to drive the men back from the threshold.

Good for her! But, of course, she couldn't do much. He didn't know that he could do much, either; he hadn't any very clear idea as to that, except that he wanted to arrive in short order, and be where she was.

Now they had grabbed Virgie; one of them was holding her—and when she kicked and wriggled, he slapped her! That was too much. Terry's blood boiled. He wasn't afraid of a regiment. Out he whipped his revolver—"Bang!" and "Bang!" And he yelled like an Indian.

The ruffians heard him, and saw him. They ran for their horses. They didn't know that he was only a boy, maybe. They were cowards, at heart.

Virgie heard him, and saw him, too. She broke free, and was running for him and calling.

"Terry! Terry! Quick!"

The last man to mount seized her again, and carried her to his horse.

"Drop that girl!" shouted Terry, furiously, pointing his gun.

He was afraid to shoot, lest he hit Virgie. Oh, shucks! The other men were scurrying away. This

last man had vaulted aboard, with Virgie clutched tightly. Terry was near enough to see his face plainly. It was a hairy face, under an old slouch hat. Something in the face and the hunched shoulders looked familiar.

"Pine Knot Ike! Yes, sir! Pine Knot Ike!"

He hammered in flight, with Terry hot after him.

Terry's old horse had wakened. Never had the old horse footed it so fast as this.

"Catch Virgie! Oh, catch Virgie!" Terry implored, and the old horse understood. He always had liked Virgie. She petted him and fed him sugar.

Virgie wriggled again, and struck and scratched, and even *bit*. She must have bitten Pine Knot's wrist or hand, for he sort of shook her loose—she almost slipped off——

"Bang!" challenged Terry's revolver, at random, across the space of prairie. Oh, if he only dared to try to shoot straight! "Bang!"

Pine Knot turned his ugly face, and saw that he was being overhauled.

"Drop that girl!" yelled Terry.

But, instead, Pine Knot twisted about, leveled his own revolver around Virgie—she grasped at his arm—he shot—there was a puff of smoke, and "Bang!"

"Bang!" answered Terry. Now he had only one cartridge left. He ought to save that, or else reload; but he didn't pause to reload; he was drawing close.

Pine Knot knew. Now he let Virgie slip. No, not exactly slip. He threw her—with a fling as if she were a struggling cat—aside; and she went rolling

over and over, poor little thing. He had got rid of her. She bothered him.

He showed his teeth at Terry; and whirling his horse shot again, "Bang!" Terry's horse gave a grunt and a great leap. Terry pulled short, just beyond Virgie, who was lying in a heap; and he was so crazy mad that all he could see was Ike's form coming on, perhaps to capture them both.

He thought that maybe Virgie was killed, and he knew that his old horse was hard hit, right in the chest, and he was fairly beside himself with rage. He could not tell how he did it; but, without aiming, he pointed "Wild Bill's" revolver—he absolutely felt that the muzzle was right in line—his whole thought was focussed on the line between the muzzle and Pine Knot's bobbing chest; and he pulled trigger.

"Bang!"

He barely glimpsed Pine Knot reel in the saddle, and topple down, while his horse veered free. He didn't wait to see more. His own horse was down; he sprang aside and rushed back to Virgie.

She wasn't dead! Not a bit! For she was sitting up, and rubbing her head, and staring.

"Oh, Virgie! Are you hurt, Virgie?"

"Uh uh. No, I'm not hurt. I don't feel any hurt. Did you hurt that man? He fell off?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"I don't care, either. I told 'em my brother was coming and they'd better look out. I did, Terry. I beat them with a broom, too. First I locked the door on them and then they broke it in and I beat them

with a broom. Now if they're hurt it's their own fault."

"Why didn't you run out of the back door, Virgie?"

"I didn't have to. It's our house, I guess. I did think I'd run and get you, but I knew you'd come, pretty soon. So I beat them, and they held me, and they stole a lot of groceries. Is Prince hurt, Terry?"

Prince was the horse.

"Yes, he's a goner. That fellow shot him."

"He's Pine Knot Ike—he's that Pine Knot Ike, and he was carrying me off, and he shot at you and hit Prince, and I don't care if he is hurt—I don't care if he's killed," declared Virgie. "I bit him as hard as I could. He's a mean man." She was a regular little spit-fire. "He'd have hurt you, if he could." Suddenly her tone changed. She sat straighter and pointed. "Oh, Terry! Look! It's on fire!"

Terry did look.

"They set the house on fire! Come on, Virgie! Let's hurry."

A column of fummy smoke was rolling up from the house. Although they hurried they could not even get inside. The smoke poured from the windows downstairs and upstairs; in a few minutes the roof was ablaze; the weather-boarding of the outside shriveled and warped; the flames licked through; and Virgie broke right down and bawled, and Terry might only sit at a safe distance, with her in his arms, and watch the place burn.

"Don't cry, Virgie," he begged. "We can't put it out by crying."

"But if that man hadn't carried me off and you hadn't had to chase us, we could have put it out," wailed Virgie. "And we wrote and said everything was all right, and now everything's all wrong."

"No, it isn't. You're safe, and I'm safe; and ma and pa'd a heap rather have us than the house and store."

The store being a part of the house, of course both had gone up in smoke and flame together. The roof had fallen in, with a smother of sparks; and now the darkness was gathering about the last flickering flames. "

"Anyhow, we can sleep in the stable, under the horse blankets," said Terry. "That will be fun. Are you hungry, Virgie? Oh—I know! We've got milk, in the cellar."

"And meat," reminded Virgie. "A whole lot of meat, hanging up. We can cook it over the fire. There's plenty of fire! But what'll we do to-morrow, Terry? We haven't any store, and we haven't any post-office and everything's burned, and uncle's wounded and auntie'll think she'll have to come back——!"

Virgie's voice trailed off into another little wail. Terry didn't blame her. But he was the man of the outfit, so he braced her up.

"We'll think of something, so she can stay. I guess now I'd better go out to Pine Knot Ike, and Prince. Are you afraid to wait here?"

Virgie stared at him wide-eyed.

"I—don't—know. Do you have to go?"

"I ought to."

"W-well," shuddered Virgie. "I wouldn't go out there in the dark for anything, and if I sit here alone I'll scream. I feel sort of queer. I'll hide in the stable, and you hurry."

"Somebody's coming," said Terry.

At first he thought that it might be the men from the swing station. The hoof-beats of horses sounded dully; two riders bore down through the gloom; they pulled up sharply beside the smouldering ruins.

"Hello! What's the matter here?"

They were "Wild Bill" Hickok and young Billy Cody, fully armed and grimly anxious.



"DROP THAT GIRL!" SHOUTED TERRY, FURIOUSLY, POINTING HIS GUN.

CHAPTER VII

SEEKING THEIR FORTUNE AGAIN

NOBODY could have been more welcome. Terry faced them gladly, while Virgie dried her tears.

"Some bush-whackers burned us out."

"Rather looks like it," agreed Billy Cody. "The skunks!" His eyes glinted angrily as he gazed about, reading the signs.

"How many were there?" quickly asked "Wild Bill."

"Eight or ten. I wasn't here when they came. Virgie was here all alone."

"I beat 'em with a broom, and when Terry came they ran and Terry chased 'em and shot Pine Knot Ike," informed Virgie.

"Oh! That yellow dog? You got him, did you?"

"He was carrying off Virgie and that made me mad," admitted Terry. "He saw I was catching him and he threw her down, and I thought he'd killed her; so I shot right at him and I guess I hurt him pretty bad."

"The skulking coward. Kidnapped her for a shield and ransom, I reckon," rapped "Wild Bill." "Where is he?"

"Out there." And Terry pointed. "He shot my horse under me, first."

"We'd better go see, Billy."

"We sighted this fire away yonder down the trail," explained Billy Cody, as they turned away. "The station hands didn't know whether it was Injuns, or what, so we lit out to learn about it."

They were gone a considerable time. When they returned they brought in Prince's saddle and bridle.

"Your hoss is dead, and so's your man—or what pretended to be a man," announced "Wild Bill." "You hit him plumb center. We followed the trail of the others a mile or two. They'd killed your cows, in passing. Another dirty trick. So seems like you're pretty well wiped out. That must have been a regular low-down gang of robbers, using the war as an excuse. Where's your mother?"

"She's gone east. My father's wounded. She's got to tend to him."

"You two here alone?" inquired Billy.

"Yes; but we didn't mind. We were doing fine, until——" and Terry choked.

"That's shore tough luck," mused Billy. "I'd like to have been here."

"What are you calculating on next?" queried "Wild Bill." "Got any place to go?"

"You can live at the Grasshopper with my folks," invited Billy Cody. "Ma'd be powerful glad to have you."

Terry had been doing some hard thinking.

"N-no. Much obliged, Billy. Guess I'll take Virgie

and go back to Denver. Then she can stay with her folks there, and I can get a job. 'Twon't do any good to hang 'round here in Kansas. If I did that, ma'd worry and be coming back, and my father'd worry. After we're settled I'll tell her all about it, but I don't want to bother her when there's no use in it. She couldn't do any good, worrying."

"You're the right stuff," asserted "Wild Bill." "How you going?"

"Join a bull train, I reckon, and work my way. I can drive bulls. I helped drive clear across the plains three years ago—and we drove out from Ohio, too, before that," stanchly answered Terry.

"That's man talk," approved "Wild Bill." "Where'll you sleep to-night? Down at the station?"

"Uh uh!" uttered Virgie. "We're going to sleep in the stable, under horse blankets; aren't we, Terry?"

"Hooray!" cheered "Wild Bill," admiringly. "Expect you'll take your broom to bed with you."

"It's burned," said Virgie. "I bit that man in the arm, though; didn't I, Terry?"

"Got anything to eat?" asked Billy Cody.

"Sure," Terry declared. "There's stuff in the cellar."

And that was so. The outside cellar, which was a dug-out, had not been burned, for the simple reason that it was covered with dirt.

"Got any money?"

"N-no," confessed Terry. "That was burned, too, along with the broom."

"Lookee here," spoke "Wild Bill." "Billy and I

can't stop; we're on scout duty, and under orders from the colonel, and we're bound south." He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. "Here's a hundred dollars, more or less. It's all I happen to have. You take it; and when the west-bound stage comes along in the morning you get aboard and go as far as you can. It's the messenger coach, and likely won't have many passengers; so I reckon you can squeeze in."

"Oh—I don't want any money, Bill," stammered Terry. "I can work my way. I'd as soon work my way as not."

"I won't listen to that line of talk," retorted "Wild Bill." "You two are burned out, and Billy and I've got money enough between us, and here's the roll. You may need it. If you don't need it send it back. But I advise you to travel as far as you can by stage, so as to get through quicker. The Injuns are liable to make the trail pretty warm, any day. Your mother and father won't mind losing this store and house, as long as you're safe."

"W-well. I'll send it back, all right," accepted Terry. Of course he had Virgie to look out for. "Where'll I send it?"

"Just to 'Wild Bill' Hickok, Fort Leavenworth. It'll find me. But no hurry. What's money for, if not to help somebody along who hasn't got it?"

"I'm mightily obliged, Bill. Here's your gun, anyway. I guess I'm done with it."

"Keep it."

"Nope, thank you." And Terry soberly shook his

head. "I don't want it any more, please. I—I—doesn't seem as if I could ever fire another shot, Bill."

"Wild Bill" took it.

"I know how you feel, youngster," he said. "I've had to do that kind of work myself—defending something or somebody; and after it was over I always felt the same way. No man hates to pull trigger against a human being worse than I do. It's a serious matter."

And coming from "Wild Bill" Hickok, the pistol expert, that sounded odd; but he spoke in earnest.

Billy Cody gravely nodded.

"You're entitled to that other gun—the one that shot your hoss," he offered.

"I wouldn't touch it," shuddered Terry.

"All right. I don't blame you. Well, what Bill and I don't have time to tend to, the station men will look after, to-morrow. We'll tell 'em to keep for you whatever stuff you leave. You two stay close to-night, and hop the stage in the morning. So long, and good luck."

"You'd better take a dollar out of that roll and buy the girl another broom," laughed "Wild Bill." "I bet you with a broom she'd clean out the trail from here clear to Denver!"

They shook hands with Terry, and leaned down and shook hands politely with Virgie; and away they rode, south into the darkness.

Terry gazed gratefully after. They had been friends in need.

He and Virgie managed a supper of milk and a slice of antelope quarter scorched on some coals, and a half-baked potato. They weren't very hungry. The sight of the smoking ruins spoiled their appetites.

Virgie slept first-rate under the horse blanket, but Terry found it hard to keep his eyes closed. He had her to guard. There were noises, by mice and rats and coyotes—he smelled the smoke—he saw the house burning—he chased Pine Knot—he did everything all over again, and he wondered what his father and mother would think.

They'd be surprised when they heard from him; but that wouldn't be until he and Virgie were safe in Denver, and then it would be too late for them to worry!

The stage was due about six o'clock in the morning. He and Virgie had little packing to work at, beforehand. They were down to the horse blankets, and the clothes they wore; and Prince's saddle and bridle. There were a few pans in the dug-out cellar, but they wouldn't take those.

The stage came right on time, with Lew Hill peering from the box. They didn't need to stand in the road and wave; he was all ready to stop, and stop he did.

"By jiminy, you got burned out for sure, didn't you!" he hailed. "I heard about it this morning. Billy Cody says you licked the gang with a broom and then chased 'em down to the Arkansas River and took a scalp."

"Can we ride a way with you, Lew?" asked Terry.

"We're going to Denver. I'll pay as far as I can."

"You bet you'll pay, but not with money," asserted Lew. "You'll work your passage. Sling your traps on and climb aboard, both of you. I'm short a messenger."

That was so. Lew was alone. The express coach, called the messenger coach, left the Missouri River every Monday morning, when there were no mails in. It carried only the express packages, and sometimes what mail had been laid over from the other coaches, and took passengers if it had any space for them. An express messenger or guard was supposed to ride on the box, through to the other end; and check up the express and guard the valuables.

"My messenger got sick back a piece, and had to go to bed at Guittards' station," continued Lew. "I'm too plumb afraid to ride alone on this here coach full of Government dockyments and other valuable stuff. When I heard at the swing station that you and the girl were waiting to go to Denver I was surely tickled. This coach needs protection bad. How about it? Will you take the job, for your passage?"

"I'll help," cried Virgie.

"Aw, shucks!" Terry blurted. "I'd rather pay, Lew. I don't know enough to be messenger." What he did know was that Lew intended he shouldn't pay; it was a scheme.

"Sure you know enough. You've had schooling, and you can handle a gun. Here's the messenger's sawed-off scatter-gun; and here's the way-bill, to check up by. If I don't get you for messenger, me or the

boys ahead'll have to take aboard a hostler—and that would be a pretty note, riding with a hostler on the box, who like as not can't read or write."

"I'll try, then," said Terry.

"Hand up your traps. Reckon you both had better ride atop. The coach is near full. I've got all the speeches made in Congress for the past two weeks, besides the express; and those Congressmen have done a heap o' talkin'. That'll be great stuff for the Injuns. They'll choke to death on it. The boys back at the station said to tell you they'd look out for whatever you leave. They'll stow it away. Billy Cody was in again last night—him and 'Wild Bill'—and made arrangements. All 'board!"

With Terry settled on the box and Virgie clinging fast amidst the packages on the top, the coach lumbered on. This was great good luck.

"We're sitting on \$30,000 in specie," remarked Lew, after Terry had retold the story of last night's adventures, "but that gun's loaded with buckshot, both barrels, hosses are tip-top, all 'long the line, and for one, I wouldn't ask a better man on the seat with me—not if I was going to drive clear through. You aren't very big, but you weigh as much as Billy Cody, and he weighs close to 'Wild Bill' himself."

CHAPTER VIII

TERRY GUARDS THE COACH

LEW finished out his run of thirty-five miles, and turned the lines and the coach over to the next driver, "Bishop" West. He turned over Terry and Virgie, too; for when "Bishop" climbed to the box he greeted them both with a friendly smile.

"Good company makes a short trip," he remarked. "I didn't know but what Ben Holladay himself was aboard by the way you-all came romping in."

"Bishop" West proved to be a very pleasing man, and exceedingly popular along the route. He talked like a college man, rarely swore ('twas said), and could go into a pulpit and preach a sermon. He had stories of some exciting rides. Once he had been caught in a storm and his toes had been frozen off.

All this afternoon the messenger coach rolled steadily onward. Toward evening "Bishop" was relieved by Charlie Haynes. When the drivers got off, they took their whips with them. That was one thing they never left. The whip belonged to the driver. It was his scepter. As "Bishop" explained:

"I'll lend my shirt or my boots, but when it comes to lending my whip I balk. When a fellow's carried

his whip several hundred miles, and can nip a fly off the back of the lead hoss without touching the hide, he feels as though he was married to it. He's about as handy without it as a cat is without a tail. And no other whip, or tail either, has the right hang to it."

Driver Charlie Haynes was one of the old-timers. He had been driving stage for seventeen years; began in Ohio and kept drifting west, until here he was, on the Overland. He said that the box of the Concord coach was home to him.

The messenger coach rolled on, heading northwest for the great Platte Valley. Once at Fort Kearney, on the Platte, then there would be a long, straight run, westward, up the wide, shallow Platte, to Julesburg.

Sitting alertly on the box, his sawed-off shot-gun across his knees, as Overland messenger guarding the express, Terry felt about as important as the great Ben Holladay might feel.

He was riding on a special coach of the Overland Stage Line. He was supposed not to leave it for a minute, except for meals—and the meals were supplied to him free, because he was the messenger. The station-keepers at the home stations would not take pay for Virgie's meals, either, perhaps because she was a girl and girls were rather scarce; or perhaps because the drivers tipped them a wink.

The \$30,000 in specie was in a little iron safe under the seat. To be sitting on top of \$30,000 gave a fellow somewhat of an importance, also.

Virgie slept inside, to-night, on the express packages leveled off by several sacks of mail—the soft-

est sacks. There was room enough for her to sit up—but that was all. Terry dozed on the seat, for a while, so as to be there in case of a hold-up; but he was so tired that he almost toppled off, and the driver, a good-natured man by the name of Jack Braden, after a bit told him to get into the boot.

"Sure, that's allowable," insisted Jack. "I'll kick backward and wake you up, if there's trouble. When I kick, you pop out, ready for business."

Terry took his shot-gun to bed with him, and shared the boot with the treasure safe. He slept doubled up, but he slept hard. Now and again he lurched and half wakened, when the stage struck a creek bed, and he knew that he was traveling on and on, through the star-lighted night, across the plains.

The first stop, at a swing station for fresh horses, made him hold his breath a moment. But he soon found out, and the other stops did not bother him. In fact, he had not amounted to much as a guard, for when finally he wakened with both eyes, the blackness of the boot had faded to grayness. Morning had come.

He heard a merry tune, above him, and above the rumble of wheels and the clatter of hoofs. The coach was still all right. He wriggled out, in haste and a little ashamed, and peered up into the laughing face of Bob Hodge, again.

Bob and his copper bugle were on the box, just as a year ago.

"By thunder!" challenged Driver Bob. "I've been wondering where that messenger was. How long

have you been in there? They told me I had a gal asleep on the packages inside the coach, and that she'd protect me in a pinch, but I didn't know about anybody else. My hair's been standing straight for the last ten miles. Injuns always attack at dawn—and they're awful keen to capture those bound volumes of Government speeches. It makes light reading for 'em, to occupy their time between raids."

Bob drove from Thirty-two Mile to Kearney.

"Who comes next?" queried Terry. "Bill Trotter?"

"Nope. Bill's been transferred farther west. He's driving between Valley Station and Bijou, on the Denver line. Times are changing, and we drivers change with 'em. We like new scenery, same as anybody."

Yes, the stage line was changing, too. As he rolled westward, Terry could see that with half an eye. Stations had been rebuilt and enlarged and new ones located; the station-keepers and the "hands" were busy and alert; the horses and mules were well fed and well groomed—picked stock, with every strap of their harness oiled and every buckle shining.

Mr. Holladay had been spending a lot of money. Nobody knew exactly how much. But many of the horses had cost \$200 apiece, and he had bought about a thousand already. The coaches cost \$1,000 apiece, and he had bought at least fifty. The harness cost \$150 a four-horse set, and there were almost 3,000 horses and mules in use.

Altogether, according to the reckoning of one of the drivers, there was \$500,000 worth of animals,

\$55,000 worth of harness, \$100,000 worth of coaches; and, what with salaries and feed and other up-keep, the Overland Stage Line, "lock, stock and barrel," figured up to about two million and a half dollars for the year, in outfit and expenses.

"Lookee here," proposed Bob abruptly. "There's a clear stretch ahead. Suppose you handle the ribbons for a spell. I'll teach you the tricks of the trade. Then some day maybe you'll be drawing down your seventy-five a month and board, like the rest of us. You're used to hosses, I take it."

"I've driven a team; and I helped drive a mule and a half-buffalo across to Denver," asserted Terry.

"Fours aren't much different from a span, and when you can drive fours you can drive sixes, if you've got fingers enough. Begin on these fours; at the next stage they use sixes, and I'll pass the word along that you're a cub who wants to be a king whip. The boys are always willing to teach a cub, if he doesn't act too smart. Here's your bunch of lines."

The horses kept the road without guiding. There were four lines, two to be held in either hand, between the fingers, and Terry speedily got the knack of it. He was driving from the wrong side, of course, and Bob did the braking. But after a bit Bob insisted upon changing places.

"There's as much in using the brake right as there is in handling the lines. A good driver'll save his team a whole lot, with the brake; and a poor driver'll simply nag' em into a lather. You've got to know

how to drive with your foot as well as with your hands."

Terry drove nobly for an hour. That was a great sensation—to be piloting a four-horse Overland stage across the boundless plains, with Driver Bob leaning back in comfort beside him, and now and then uttering a word of caution, telling him when to trot and when to pull down, when to brake and when to release.

"Up-grade, give 'em the loose rein and let 'em take their own gait; don't push 'em unless they show sign of being stuck, and then in that case throw the gad into 'em and talk to 'em proper. Down-hill, ease 'em with the brake and hold 'em up with the bit. On the level let 'em out and make your time. It's the steady system that covers the miles."

At the next swing station they changed to sixes, and Terry took his turn at these.

Virgie, too, was enjoying the ride immensely. She trundled along in state, with a whole coach to herself, and might look down upon the toiling emigrant outfits as though she were a princess touring the country.

By night Terry's arms ached. There was considerable work in driving four and six horses, even at odd spells. However, the driving served to make the journey shorter—but he was still the messenger, and he decided that he would sleep no more in the boot.

He very well knew that a messenger ought to stay upon the box, day and night. A messenger asleep underneath the seat, behind the leather apron of the boot, would not be much good in a surprise attack.

So this night he slept sitting up, between stations.

That made him earn his pay, for once in a while, as he nodded, his head was nearly jerked from his neck.

"Fiddler Jim" Graves, who took the lines out of Cottonwood Springs, only laughed at him.

"By the time you've made a round trip you can sleep on a tin roof in a hail storm. Me, I can sleep on this box for ten miles at a stretch, and have an ear open every minute. When I wake up, all I have to do is to taste the dust to tell where I am. Stow yourself in the boot, if you want to. I'll not report you to the division agent. He's asleep himself, wherever he is. You can bet on that."

However, Terry stuck it out. If the division agent did catch him in the boot—wow! On the Overland there were three main divisions: the Eastern Division, between Atchison and Denver; the Central Division, between Denver and Salt Lake; and the Western Division, between Salt Lake and the California end.

They were about 600 miles each, and in charge of division superintendents. And each division was divided into three other divisions, of about 200 miles each, in charge of a division agent. Atchison and Fort Kearney were one division, Kearney and Julesburg were a second division, and Julesburg and Denver were a third division.

If an agent were met, just what he would think of a boy messenger Terry did not dare to say; but he certainly would not think much of a boy who hid in the driver's boot.

At Fort Kearney the trip had been one-third over. At Julesburg, on the third day from home (or the

fourth day from the Missouri River) it was two-thirds over.

There were only a few packages for Salt Lake and beyond; the greater bulk stayed in the coach and went on to Denver. That was good. It saved fussing with the way-bill—although Terry had no fear of the way-bill. It was as plain as print. He had to sign his name once—and he signed it large and round: "Terry Richards, Act'g Messenger."

Amidst the joking leveled at him, a quiet man had stood, listening and watching, but saying not a word. When the stage pulled out again, on up the South Platte, for the mountains where Denver waited, "Sandy" Sterling, the new driver, laughed.

"Do you know who that say-nothing but heap-look gent was, sizing you up, back there in the station?"

"No."

"That was the division agent. I reckon he was sure astonished at the small shadow you cast, for a messenger; but Ben Holladay hires by their inside measure and not by their outside. So Mister Division Agent figgers that maybe you're bigger'n you look."

"Is Sol Judy still driving out of Denver?" asked Terry.

"No, he isn't. He's enlisted, I hear. Long Slim's driving on the cut-off, between Denver and Bijou; but there's some talk of doing away with the cut-off and running from Julesburg straight west almost to the mountains, and connecting with Denver from there. That's on account of Injun troubles north of Julesburg, where the main line goes now."

"You haven't had any Injun troubles around here, have you?"

"None to speak of. That's not saying we won't have, though. Gid-dap!"

The road west from Julesburg was rough and heavy with sand. They'd had breakfast at Julesburg, dinner would be waiting at Spring Hill, and supper and Bill Trotter at Valley. But on many stretches the groaning coach made only three miles an hour. The air was hot and still; the dust hung thick as the coach ploughed along; the mules coughed, Virgie sputtered.

"Aren't we almost there?" she appealed.

"To-morrow, I guess," Terry answered. "This isn't any worse than it was back at Alkali, you know."

"One thing's sure: we'll be late into Valley," spoke Driver Sterling. And he added, suddenly: "Mentioning Injun, look yonder." He pointed with his whip.

There was a wide gap in the procession of toiling freighters and emigrants who had scarcely ever been out of sight, all the way from Kansas. The road was lonely. Right and left extended the plains, of dun soil dotted with clumps of sage and grease-wood, and broken here and there by sharp hummocks and wind-cut buttes. The only bright green was the willows and cottonwoods of the Platte River. The only objects moving on the soil were the prairie-dogs and a few antelope—and now, Indians!

The Indians were about twenty—horseback, seemed to be not more than a couple of miles distant, on the right, riding by twos and threes, parallel with the stage

road, armed with bows and lances and jogging easily through the shimmer of sand and alkali.

Virgie exclaimed:

"Don't let them catch us. I'm afraid of Indians. They tried to buy me."

Terry's grip tightened on his shot-gun, and he tried to speak calmly.

"What'll they do? Head us off, Sandy?"

Driver "Sandy" spat over the wheel.

"Sioux or Cheyennes, I reckon. Looks like a war party, but they may be ten or twenty miles off. That's a mirage—that's only the figgers of 'em, thrown on the air, somehow. Well, I hope they keep where they belong."

For about ten minutes the figures were in sight; then they vanished, as if wiped out by a breeze. "Sandy" sighed a breath of relief.

"Told you so. Mebbe they're bound into the mountains, after the Utes. But this war is stirring the plains Injuns up. While the whites are a-fighting each other, Mister Injun thinks he might as well take a hand on his own hook."

Although for the rest of the day the coach outfit kept a sharp outlook, no Indians were again sighted, except a small band of Arapaho men and women, camped at Spring Hill, to beg from the overlanders who passed through.

It was after dark when Valley Station and Bill Trotter were reached. That had been a long, hard day—and a nervous day. Virgie was so tired that she could scarcely eat the supper of salt pork and soggy

potatoes and coffee made with alkali water, and dried-apple pie. They put her to bed in the coach before starting on. Terry tried to talk with Bill, on the box, but he nodded, Bill's voice got farther and farther away, the coach lumbered on, creaking and swaying and plunging—and huddled lax, Terry actually slept.

He slept pretty well all night; for when he stiffly straightened up at last, and blinked about him, the gray dawn was revealing the same old road, following up along the Platte, with the lonesome plains-land lying widely on either hand, the six horses plodding before, and the driver, whip and bunch of lines in hand, sitting beside him.

"About time you came alive," grunted Bill. "How's your smeller? Can you smell Injun?"

Terry obediently sniffed.

"No. Can you?"

"I can!" asserted Virgie.

She was on top again.

"How did Virgie get there? I thought she was inside."

"So she was," answered Bill. "But she was holerling to climb out, so back at Kelly's Ranch station I stopped and let her loose. Now I wish I hadn't."

"Why?"

"'Cause my smeller's working, and it says 'Injuns.' If that gang you were telling about want to make us trouble, they'll be laying for us about four miles ahead, in the hills between here and Beaver Creek."

"I smell them. I do!" declared Virgie, wrinkling her blistered nose.

That was absurd. She was only talking. But Bill pulled short.

"In that case the best place for you is inside again," he said. "I won't have any gal, or woman either, riding in plain sight through Injun country. We'll just dig a hole for you in amongst those sacks, and cover you over till we're in sight o' Beaver."

Virgie sobered; so did Terry. Whether or not Bill Trotter smelled Indians, he acted much in earnest; for he stopped the team, swung down, and reaching inside managed to open the stage door.

"In you go," he ordered.

"I don't want to be covered up," faltered Virgie.

"Yes, you do, Virgie," Terry encouraged. "We'll make you a nice hole. It will be fun, for a little way. You can pretend you're in bed."

By working from both sides and hauling the sacks and packages about he and Bill made a hole between the seats. Virgie settled into it. The seats kept the mail and express stuff from crowding against her, and she had plenty of air.

"Just leave those curtains tight," Bill bade. "And let's make a rampart of those sacks on top, kinder to protect our backs."

He gathered the lines, and they started on.

"Those are the sand hills I was speaking of. Beaver's eight or nine miles beyond. I'm going through lickity-split. All you'll have to do is to hang hard, watch both sides and front and rear, and, if you see any heads, turn loose with your gun. I'll drive. Don't let any red rascal touch a bit, and don't waste a

shot. The fellows behind won't matter so much; it's the fellows who are cutting us off that'll need tending to."

The road ran between a short line of bare bluffs and the river. Terry sat tense, his heart beating wildly, his gun across his knees. Bill drove leisurely, but with tight rein, his puckered eyes shrewdly scanning the broken slopes to the left, before.

The six mules pricked their ears forward, as if they, too, were suspicious.

The low bluffs were almost opposite, a quarter of a mile away. On a sudden Bill's lash flew out, with a hiss and a crack; he whooped explosively, and with lash and voice and shaking lines he instantly lifted his six mules into a run.

"Here we go! Run, you long-eared sons of Satan! Somebody's due for a surprise-party. I'd rather it'd be on the Injuns than on us."

CHAPTER IX

A RACE WITH THE ENEMY

THE six mules fairly tore. The harness jingled, the coach lurched and bounded, Terry clutched the seat rail with one hand, and braced with his toes just touching the dash; Bill, his boots firmly planted, his arms jerking to the tug of the bits, held his frightened team to their feet and urged them on. Inside rose the voice of Virgie. Evidently she was not at all pleased.

The dangerous bluffs were flowing past without a sign of attack. The other end, and the open country, were in sight—when Driver Bill's voice rang out sharply:

"There they come! I told you so—dod rat 'em!"

Terry had seen as quickly. Bursting from a draw in a slope to the left, ahead, a dozen horsemen were scouring across the little flat between, bent upon cutting the route before. They were Indians, sure enough. They rode pell-mell.

"Some behind, too; ain't there?" queried Bill shortly.

He must have had eyes in the back of his head, for when Terry hastily glanced rearward, more Indians

had appeared, in their very wake, pelting like mad alongside the road as if they had arrived only a little too late.

An arrow streaked over the coach and skimmed upon the road, before.

"Let 'em shoot," grunted Bill. "They won't do much damage that way. It's those fellows ahead we got to watch out for. We got to get there first or else keep 'em from closing in."

He shouted, and lashed with lines and whip. The mules were doing nobly. Their dusty hides were beginning to show blotches of sweat, the lather from their bits drifted back and flecked the seat, but they never stumbled or wavered, and they twitched the heavy coach as though it were a cart.

The race was going to be mighty close. The angle between the course of the stage and the course of the Indians before lessened rapidly. Bill, his face gray and stern, now and again peered around the bulwarks of sacks behind. The Indians pursuing were certainly nearer.

"By golly! If we could only get shut of some o' that dead weight—do you reckon you could crawl back and tumble off a few tons of sacks?"

"I'll try," said Terry.

"Leave me your gun. Be blamed careful and don't tumble off, yourself."

That was a ticklish business, to twist around, and on hands and knees work back upon the knobby sacks; and, while tossed about, to drag and shove and topple them one by one over the sides.

"Thut!" An arrow stuck, quivering, in a sack under his very nose. The Indians were shooting at him, but he had no time to think of that. Off went sack and arrow both. It took all his strength to move some of the sacks—and had he not been so excited he probably could not have moved them at all.

The coach bounded and lurched, Bill shouted at his mules, the Indians were whooping in great glee. Terry had to pause a moment and gaze. Several of the sacks had burst in their fall; Indians were halting in the trail to examine; only three or four were now in close chase, but the coach, lightened by a few hundred pounds, seemed to travel faster. Hurrah! He shook his fist at the pursuit, and cheered wildly. Then Driver Bill's voice brought him about with a jump.

"Hey, you! Grab your gun and give 'em Ned!"

Terry dived blindly for the seat again. How he got there in such short order he never knew; but there he was—at the same time grabbing the shot-gun from between Bill's legs, and staring for the danger.

The foremost of the Indians, who were bent upon cutting the trail, was almost even with the lead mules. His pony's tail streamed straight, his broad back was hunched forward, as he drew bow for a close arrow.

"Shoot!" rasped Bill.

Terry quickly threw up his gun and pulled trigger. The butt of the gun rammed his shoulder violently, wellnigh tilting him backwards; but the buckshot sped true, for at the recoil and the smart report the Indian straightened taut, his pony gave a great leap aside, the arrow sailed into the air, and off at a tangent sped the

twain, with the rider beginning to sway weakly in his seat.

"T'other side, t'other side! Just beyond me!" panted Bill.

An Indian was forging to the front there. He was on a fast horse; he had cut in behind the stage and was coming up on the driver's side.

Terry squirmed about, planted a knee on the seat, and leveled his gun across Bill's neck; caught glimpse of a grinning face and a naked arm rising and falling as it plied the quirt. "Bang!" Amidst the belch of smoke the face and all disappeared.

"On your side again!" warned Bill.

Terry whirled, with empty gun desperately pointed. The painted rider opposite the wheel ducked and swerved and scurried to safer distance.

"Shove in your loads while you have a chance," bade Bill. "Got any?"

Terry hastily reloaded. But the Indians respected that gun. They lined up, seventy-five yards away, and clinging like monkeys to their ponies tried to keep pace with the coach while they launched their arrows.

The shafts hissed and twinkled; they glanced across the mules' backs and rattled against the coach wheels and body—ripped into the few sacks still atop, and whanged into the leather curtains. One cut a gash in the right lead mule's flank. He sprang forward as if spurred; Bill whooped joyously. The coach was beginning to draw ahead.

Little by little it gained in the race. Only one Indian, a big fellow in yellow leggins, with a feather

in his braids, was keeping pace. He had an unusually strong bow, and seemed to be an unusually good shot, for every arrow that he launched had to be watched in fear.

"Give him a dose," ordered Bill. "You can reach him."

Terry impulsively blazed away. At the movement the Indian ducked low, and hung half concealed, while he pulled his pony to widen the distance. Terry emptied the other barrel. Mister Indian bobbed upright, clapped hand to the seat of his leggins (or to the spot where a seat should have been), and yelping with pain and anger made off in earnest. He'd had enough.

"That fellow will sit standing up for a while," spoke Bill. "Well, I reckon we win. They're quitting, aren't they?"

They were. The other Indians had slackened; were about to turn back. Driver Bill talked soothingly to his mules, trying to hold them down. They were lathered and frantic.

"Virgie! Are you all right, Virgie?" Terry called.

"Yes, but I was nearly squashed. I want to see the Indians. I want to get out. Where are the Indians? Did you kill them all? There's an arrow sticking clear through this curtain!"

"Can't stop to let you out now," informed Bill. "We're 'most to Beaver. You can get out there. Do you think you can drive these mules the rest of the way?" he asked of Terry.

"Yes. Sure. I've been driving some on the road—
fours and sixes both."

"Then you'd better hold the lines to Beaver, I guess. That durned arrow pesters me nigh crazy; I can't hardly grip with one hand."

And for the first time Terry, alarmed, saw an arrow sticking in Driver Bill's farther shoulder-point.

"When did you get that? I didn't know about it."

"Didn't pay 'special attention myself," confessed Bill, "till now it began to hurt. I was too busy to think about arrows. If you'll drive to Beaver I'll get shut of it when we reach there. Just let the mules take their own pace, but keep 'em going enough so they don't stiffen up. The road's clear."

Beaver Creek station proved to be less than an hour distant. The sun was rising when they swung into sight of the single low building and the corral and sheds, beside the winding road and the sluggish Platte. The mules pricked their ears and broke into a weary but eager trot.

A great sight they all made, thought Terry, as he drove like a veteran: the dust-and-lather-caked mules, the begrimed coach with several arrows bobbing on it and Virgie's head thrust inquiringly out from a window, Driver Bill sitting and steadying the arrow in his shoulder, and he, the size of a boy, handling the ribbons.

Smoke was curling lazily from the station chimney, as if breakfast was being cooked. Somebody was washing face and tousled head in a tin basin in front of the house. A black dog was ambling about in the

bare yard. A man was busy in the corral among the horses.

As the coach lumbered on, Driver Bill uttered a tremendous yell—the regulation stage-driver's yell, but louder than usual.

"Hoo-wah-hoo-oo!" he bawled, and with his left arm cracked his whip like a pistol shot.

The tired mules jumped, Terry gallantly held them, the person at the wash-basin was staring, so was the man in the corral, so was the black dog, and a figure had appeared in the station doorway.

To grind of brake under Bill's boot they drew up amidst a flourish of triumph that evidently created a sensation; Terry tossed the lines to the ground, and was about to look around before climbing down, when Virgie cried out excitedly, the wash-basin personage exclaimed, "Gee whizz! That's Terry Richards! Hello, Terry!" the person in the doorway bolted out, cheering, and the dog barked and gamboled.

The wash-basin figure was George Stanton, the man from the doorway was Harry Revere, and the dog was good old Shep!

Terry scarcely could believe his eyes and ears. Virgie was clamoring to be let out—out she tumbled, to be hugged by George and grabbed by Harry and kissed by Shep; Terry was down in a jiffy, also, into the arms of all, including Shep: Driver Bill painfully followed.

"Did you get our letter already?"

"Have you been in a fight?"

"Jiminy, but we're glad to see you!"

"Say, somebody help me get rid of this arrow first," reminded Bill Trotter. "It's worked pretty loose. 'Tain't in far. Guess we can cut it out with a sharp knife; else shove it on through. Rub those mules down mighty well," he added to the man who had come from the corral. "They've out-run a whole passel of Injun mustangs and Ben Holladay ought to give 'em a medal."

"Come into the house and we'll get at that arrow," bade Harry. "Everybody come in. Breakfast's ready. We can eat and talk both."

"Do you want to wash, or anything?" demanded George of Terry. "Where was the fight? How many did you kill? How did you get here so quick? How far did you drive? Are you going to stay?"

"Wait till I tell you," sputtered Terry, washing up in a hurry. "What are you doing here? Isn't Harry riding express any more? How did you know we were coming? There didn't anybody pass us, you bet. I'm the messenger—did you know that? I've learned to drive, too. I can sleep sitting up."

"Where's my mother?" interrupted Virgie. "The bush-whackers burned us out and I hit them with a broom and Terry chased Pine Knot Ike with a pistol and we had our own stage and helped run it all the way from Kansas, and I hid in it from the Injuns—and I want my mother."

"She's down at Denver," explained George. "Dad's in the army, but all the rest of us are here—Harry and Shep and Duke and Jenny and me—I, I mean; and we're keeping station. We wrote you folks about

it. Harry's agent and I'm hostler; and we said if you wanted to come out and let your mother stay with your father, you could have a job, too. We'll need another hostler. The other man we've got is going to leave. Did the bush-whackers——?"

"Grub!" called Harry from the station house. "Come a-running."

There had been lots of questions without answers, but at breakfast matters finally were cleared up. Driver Bill had told his story of the Indian fight; now Terry and Virgie told about the bush-whackers and the trip out; and then Harry explained about himself and George.

"You see, I'm station-keeper here now, and George is a hostler——"

"Gosh, I didn't know you fellows were all acquainted," said Driver Bill.

"We sure are. We're old pards," laughed Harry. "But we didn't have any reason to mention it. Well, anyway, I'm station boss——"

"How long have you been here?" asked Terry.

"About a week. I quit riding express. And I put George in as hostler, and we moved all our live-stock here—Shep and Duke and Jenny. Pete, there," and Harry nodded at the other man, who had come from the stables, "wants to leave. I'll need another hostler to help George with the twelve head of stock while I cook the meals. This is a home station and I aim to give everybody apple-pie three times a day. It takes time to make apple-pie."

"Do you want to be a hostler, Terry?" queried George.

"I'll stay," cried Virgie. "I'll stay and help cook."

"Aw, we don't need a girl around," answered George. "We may have to fight Injuns. You go to Denver."

"Yes; I'd as lief be hostler," asserted Terry. "I'm looking for a job. But now I'm messenger. I've got to go to Denver, too. Then I'll come back."

"Needn't go unless you choose to," spoke Bill. "I'm going clean on to Denver myself, to get this shoulder fixed up proper. That arrow may've been pizened. I'll messenger for that far, and look out for the gal. Pete can drive to Bijou, where we pick up the next driver."

"Sure. I'll drive," said Pete.

"Don't we have to go back for those mail sacks?"

"Not on your gizzard! That's why those Government documents are taken along—to keep the Injuns quiet. The whole tribe'll be reading now for a month, and the squaws will stick their legs through the bottom of the sacks and draw the pucker string 'round their necks, and give full-dress parties to all their friends and relatives."

Thanks to Bill Trotter the arrangements were made. Terry agreed to stay, in reply to Harry's offer and the letter that he hadn't received yet. Virgie decided that she'd rather go on, with Mr. Trotter, because then to-morrow she'd see her mother.

In about an hour the coach rolled on, Pete driving

a fresh team of sixes, Bill sitting beside him as messenger, and Virgie waving good-bye from between them.

Terry proceeded to get acquainted with Beaver Creek home station of the Overland Stage Road.

CHAPTER X

BEAVER CREEK HOME STATION

THE stage from Denver was not due until noon, so there was ample time for the inspection of Beaver Creek Station. As Harry had said, while clearing off the table after the west-bound stage had gone on, "Beaver Creek wasn't large, but it had plenty of room to grow in."

It sat here by itself, in a lonely stretch of flat country, on the south side of the stage road. Just across the stage road was a crooked slough; and beyond the slough was the South Platte River.

The next station on the west was Bijou, twenty miles—with the road between a hard pull among sloughs and sand-hills. At Bijou the stage road left the Platte River and turned to the south on the cut-off for Denver, which was 120 miles from Beaver.

The nearest station on the east was American Ranch, twelve miles. Julesburg, where the main stage road turned northward on its through route to Salt Lake and California, was seventy-seven miles.

So Beaver Creek home station was not at all crowded!

The station house was a low building of sod walls

three feet thick, and sod roof. It had one room, divided off by muslin partitions into dining-room, bedroom and kitchen. The muslin broke the view, but that was about all. Anybody could hear right through it, and the shadows cast on it were very funny, from the other side. The ceiling was muslin, also, to keep the dust from sifting down. The floor was clay. There were three small square windows, one beside the door and one in the center of either side wall, closed by wooden shutters instead of glass panes.

The dining-room or living-room had a fire-place and large flue; the kitchen had a rusty stove and chimney; the bed-room had several bunks softened with hay mattresses and blankets; there was a rough board table to eat from, and hand-made chairs and stools with seats of cowhide.

On the wall hung a shot-gun and an old smooth-bore musket. George wore his cap-and-ball revolver. It used to have a wooden hammer, for looks, but now he had equipped it with a real hammer, and it was a "sure-'nough scalp-getter," he said.

The corral was of poles, and the stable, at the end of it, was of rough-hewn cottonwood logs, chinked after a fashion but pretty airy, under a dirt roof.

There was a well, from which the water was drawn by a bucket and windlass. The water was only seepage water, and tasted rather flat, but it was wet.

Altogether, as Harry remarked, this was a snug little outfit, and about the best station on the road! On a clear day you could see the Rocky Mountains, like clouds, a hundred miles west; the slough was full

of ducks and the brush was full of rabbits; two stages passed through every day and stopped for meals, news from Denver was only twenty-four hours old, and a sod house was the warmest and the coolest kind of a house, winter and summer. Indians could not burn it, either. It was a regular fort.

For the "privilege" of living on such luxury he was paid \$60 a month, as station-keeper, and got a profit from the meals, as cook; and George and Terry were paid \$40 a month each, as hostlers. Could anything be grander!

"Why, boys, we're kings; we're monarchs of all we survey," declared Harry that night as they three sat at the table in the dining-room, lighted by a coal-oil lantern, and Shep snored upon the floor. "There's nobody bigger—except the drivers. Of course, a stage driver is the head king on the Overland. We'll make Beaver Creek the most popular station between Denver and Atchison. People will all look forward to stopping at Beaver Creek, where there's apple-pie three times a day, and two kinds of rabbits, and seven kinds of ducks."

"Aw, shucks!" complained George. "I heard Bill Trotter say he wished you'd turn your dried-apple slices other end 'round, once in a while; and I'm so full of duck that I quack."

"Try rabbit then for a spell. They don't quack," retorted Harry. "Or else help yourself to the salt pork—but that's expensive. Anyway, I mean to have our meals the richest, and our animals the glossiest, and our harness the oiliest, and our service the quick-

est, and our faces the smiliest, of any station on the road. If we stick here, people will want to settle with us and make a city. They'll hate to go on. I'm looking forward to having Ben Holladay as a guest. They say he leaves twenty-dollar gold pieces on the table when he's pleased. That will buy quite a heft of dried apples."

Harry rattled on, half joking but enthusiastic.

Terry was beginning to feel at home. It seemed good to be with Harry and George again. They had swapped all their news. He had made the rounds of the whole establishment—had spoken to Duke, the half-buffalo, and Jenny, the gaunt yellow mule, who had been the faithful team driven by him and Harry from Kansas to the "Cherry Creek diggin's" of Denver; and had helped look after the six mules and the extra six horses in the corral.

The Denver stage had arrived. He and George, as hostlers, had changed the teams in expert fashion, handed the bunch of lines to Tommy Ryan, the east-bound driver, and stood, with their hands on their hips and their hats tipped back, watching the stage whirl on.

Then they went in to eat the dinner that Harry had saved out for them. Then while Harry washed the dishes they watered the cooled-off team and finished rubbing them down, in the stalls, and threw them a few mouthfuls of hay. Then they took the shot-gun and the musket and ammunition, and got some ducks at the slough.

The slough was fairly alive with ducks. It was only

150 yards from the house—a long, sinuous slough, with high banks and considerable marsh, and thickly grown to bright green weeds and rushes. There was no trouble in getting ducks; a fellow could take his pick, and Shep would fetch them out.

The main trouble lay in eating them, according to George.

"It's duck, rabbit and apple pie, day in and day out. Golly, but I'd like an egg, or some butter that isn't canned! Our potatoes are all sprouty, too. We did have bacon, but Harry's saving that for Mr. Holladay. He won't be through till fall, though."

At evening they fed and watered the stock, picketed Jenny and Duke in fresh grazing, and got ready for the early stage in the morning.

Besides Duke and Jenny they had twelve stage animals, sometimes horses, sometimes mules, sometimes both, to take good care of. The freshest team of six went out with the stage; the team just in were entitled to twenty-four hours' rest; so there had to be a team for the stage in between, going the opposite direction. That was the system. The animals were all top animals, because the runs both ways were hard runs.

With baled hay at twenty-five dollars a ton and corn at seven cents a pound, the keep of the stage stock was quite an item for Ben Holladay. Each animal ate twenty-five pounds of corn a day.

After supper there wasn't much to do at the station. So the "hands" went to bed early, for they had to

turn out before sun-up—Harry to cook breakfast and the hostlers to attend to the stock.

This first night Terry managed a letter to his mother, telling her of the bush-whackers' attack and the trip west, and the great luck that he and Virgie had had all along the way. She would have no reason to worry now. He also decided to send "Wild Bill's" money back to him at once.

From Denver, Virgie—or Mrs. Stanton, rather—forwarded a change of underclothes; and it was high time. Sunday was wash-day at Beaver Creek. They each was supposed to wash out a flannel shirt, a bandanna handkerchief, a pair of stockings, and a suit of underwear. Before his outfit came, Terry had to take a sun-bath, in his trousers, while his other clothes dried.

The summer flowed smoothly. The up and down stages, with Bill Trotter or Tommy Ryan on the box, passed regularly; every little while there were freighters or emigrants; no Indians bothered; the ducks, except the young broods, had disappeared, but the rabbits stayed, and so did the dried-apple pies.

Then, one noon before mounting the box of the stage from Bijou, Bill beckoned Terry aside.

"Say," said Bill shortly, "tell your cook to lay off on those apple pies. Suffering cats! Seems as though there was an epidemic of dried-apple pie from Denver clean to Kearney. It's dried-apple pie beginning with Genesis right through to Revelations. But this Beaver Creek station is the wust on the road. Passengers are all kicking. It give 'em a bad opinion of the Over-

land. Can't that cook invent anything except apple pie? The human stomach won't stand for apple pie more'n twice a day the year 'round. It's mighty hard on us drivers."

"I'll tell Harry," promised Terry. "We're sick of apple pie, too." But Harry couldn't see it.

"Those people are getting too finicky. What do they expect for a dollar? I'm a master hand at apple pies. Besides, they're cheap and lasting. One pie sometimes lasts several days. A *lasting* kind of grub is what travelers need, don't they?"

On his trip back, Driver Bill passed out an envelope.

"Here's a letter for you," he said to Harry. "I'll leave it on the table."

It was addressed: "Champion Pie Slinger, Beaver Creek Station, Colorado." So Harry waited until the stage had gone; then he opened it and read it.

"I'll be switched!" he grumbled, quite red. "Expect whoever wrote that thinks he's funny."

Terry and George seized it and howled. It was a poem.

To Whom This May Concern

We loathe! Abhor! Detest! Despise!
 Abominate dried-apple pies!
 We like good bread, we like good meat,
 Or anything that's good to eat;
 But of all poor grub beneath the skies
 The poorest is dried-apple pies.
 Give us a tooth-ache or sore eyes
 But never more such kind of pies!

The farmer takes his gnarliest fruit,
'Tis wormy, bitter, and hard to boot;
He leaves the hulls to make us cough,
And doesn't take half the peelings off;
Then on some dirty cord they're strung,
And from some chamber window hung;
And there they serve as roost for flies
Until they're ready to make pies!
Tread on our corns, or tell us lies,
But don't pass *us* dried-apple pies!

—ALL ALONG THE LINE.

"That's mighty small encouragement for a hard-working cook," complained Harry. "What with having to ship stuff 500 miles at ten and fifteen cents a pound, and having it five weeks on the road, do those fellows expect nice fresh apples with all the water left in them?"

CHAPTER XI

A JOKE ON THE SCAR-FACE

"INJUNS!" announced George, from outside the doorway, and rushing in to buckle on his cap-and-ball revolver. "A whole pack of 'em!"

It was after dinner on a hot day in late summer. Several weeks had passed since the apple-pie "kick" delivered by "poem." Harry's hurt feelings had long since healed. In fact, he was glad to quit making pies, for the Beaver Creek station was down to plain rations. Even dried apples were difficult to import, as the prices of provisions rose on account of the war, and the freight moved slowly on the long haul across the parched, dusty Western land.

"What do you wear that cannon for?" demanded Terry, as he and Harry followed George out.

"So as to let 'em see we're armed," retorted George.

Indians were approaching from the west. There was quite a band of them, men and women both, on ponies, riding in by the stage road.

"'Rapahos, I reckon," said Harry. "Coming to beg. Well, they won't get much. But we'll have to keep our eyes on them. They'll steal your revolver off of you, George, if you aren't careful."

"I rather guess they won't," George blustered. "Shucks!" he added. "They're only Left Hand's band. They're peaceful."

A dirty, unkempt lot they were, as they tumbled off their ponies in front of the station, and shuffled forward.

"How?" greeted Left Hand, extending his paw to shake all 'round. He recognized Terry at once. "How? Where 'um squaw?"

"Denver. Not here."

"You sell 'um?"

"No."

"Six pony," Left Hand insisted.

"Not mine. She his. Ask him," directed Terry, pointing at George.

"Six pony," Left Hand repeated, to George.

"You get out," answered George. "Six bullets," and he tapped his weighty pistol. He had a great idea of that pistol.

Left Hand grinned and grunted.

"Huh! Little boy, big bang; all smoke, no hurt."

With that he turned away, leaving George red and Terry chuckling.

At smell of the Indians Shep had sneaked inside the house to hide and growl. No Indians were good Indians to Shep. The majority of the Arapahos were pressing about the door, so Harry had retreated also, to bar the way.

"Shoog?" Left Hand was hinting. "Little shoog (sugar)."

Harry shook his head violently.

"No sugar. No anything."

"Tobac'? Give tobac'?"

"No. No sugar, no tobacco."

"Whisk'. How much for whisk'? Give whisk'?"

"No whiskey on the place," asserted Harry. "Puckachee with you! No give, no trade. We're broke—down to hard pan. Need everything ourselves."

"The dog-gone beggars," scolded George. "For half a cent I'd turn my old scalp-getter loose on 'em and make 'em puckachee a-scooting. That's what! Maybe they don't know this gun's bad medicine. Who's afraid of 'Rapahos'?"

"See here, you ought not to talk that way around Indians, unless you mean business," spoke a voice near. "You might get into trouble."

George and Terry whirled about, surprised. It was an Indian, and he looked just like the other Indians, but his language was good English.

"Aw—— I didn't suppose they'd understand," George stammered.

"They're likely to understand more than you think they do, young man. They've got ears and eyes, and they're no fools."

"Say!" gasped Terry. "Are you a 'Rapaho? What's your name?"

But the Indian, who wore a brass ring in either ear and another in his nose, suddenly changed. He just stared blankly at Terry, drew the blanket, that he had partly dropped, high around his ears, and, grunting "No savvy," stalked away.

A moment before, he had talked like a white man;

now he acted like a red man. Perhaps he did it to show the boys that they could never be sure.

They had no time for discussing him. Harry sounded hard beset, inside the station.

Some of the Arapahos had pushed past him on the threshold; so he had gone in after them, to protect his goods. During the summer he had laid in a little stock of stuff to sell to emigrants and other travelers, and whatever the Indians saw, they usually wanted.

"No, no!" Harry was storming. "No shoog, no tobac', no coff', no whisk'—no *nothing*! No give, no trade. Too much crowd. Go outdoors. Drop that, you! Look out for the dog!"

Shep was barking wildly. The Arapahos might be seen pointing and trying to finger, with Harry stoutly shoving them away from the short counter.

"Guess we'd better go in, ourselves," laughed Terry—when suddenly Harry's voice rose angrily.

"Leave that alone! Here—stop thief!"

Out from the doorway burst a large Indian, with a whitish scar down one cheek. He ran a few steps, drew a half-pint yellow-glass bottle from underneath his blanket, rapidly extracted the cork with his teeth, and, tilting the bottle on his lips, drained it instantly.

Harry had pursued, but was too late, and stopped short.

"By ginger, if you can stand that——!" he panted. "I told you. It's worth six bits, too!"

"Oh, I know!" cried George. "So do you, Terry! He stole a bottle of—gee whizz! Look at him!"

As soon as he had drained the bottle the big Indian had thrown it away. For a moment he stood pleased and defiant, as if he had done something smart, while he slowly rubbed his stomach with the palm of a dirty hand. But his face began to stiffen, with a look of wonder; his hand paused, and tightened; his eyes widened, his fingers gripped——

"Wow!" cheered Harry. "Hi yi! Heap medicine dance!"

For, without further warning, the big Indian had leaped straight into the air; and the second that he landed he commenced to run in a circle like a jack-rabbit. Every now and then he leaped, as before; then he doubled over, and darted; then he sprang aside, and dived, and dodged. And he yelled frantically.

"Whoop! Ki-yi! Whoop! Whoo-oo! Ki-yi!"

The Indians outside, and the other Indians who had followed, at first gazed with amazement—until they broke into loud laughter, and joined in his song.

"Whoop! Ki-yi! Whoop! Whoo-oo! Ki-yi! Ki-yi-yi!"

Faster and faster gyrated the big Indian, clearing a circle; until with a last tremendous "Whoo-oo!" he charged, half doubled, for his pony, snatched bridle thong, plunged aboard, and, hammering madly, rode full speed right across the plains, leaving a wake of dust.

"Keep it!" yelled Harry after him. "Price was six bits, but I've had a dollar's worth out of it." And he wiped his eyes.

"What was it?" queried Terry breathlessly, of George.

"P. A. X. Pain Killer—a whole bottle! Bet he thought it was flavoring extract. It sure got action, didn't it?"

The other Arapahos all thought this was a great joke. It seemed to make them very good-natured, and also a little cautious, for they bothered Harry no more.

"Huh, huh!" gurgled Left Hand. "Heap medicine, heap dance! Strong water. Make legs go."

"He was bound to have whiskey, and that's the nearest thing to it, he figured," explained Harry to the boys. "One teaspoonful's a dose, in water—but he didn't wait for water."

"It served him right." The English-speaking Indian with the ring in his nose said that. "You want to watch out, though. He's not an Arapaho; he's a half Cheyenne from one of the dog-soldier bands. He's liable to have a bad heart toward you after this."

"What'll he try to do?"

"The buffalo are getting scarce, and yours is fat. Some morning you'll wake up with that buffalo and mule both gone, if you don't corral them at night. The Cheyennes and Arapahos in the south are growing restless, too. Left Hand's all right, but he doesn't control the other bands. They see that the white soldiers have gone to war. There may be trouble along the stage line. I thought I'd warn you."

"Thanks," answered Harry; and his jaw was set.

"We'll hold the fort. I'll lay in some more Pain Killer."

The Indian shrugged his shoulders, and sauntered away.

"Who was that man with the Arapahos, who spoke English as good as anybody?" later asked Terry.

"That man? He's an educated 'Rapaho—went to school in the East. They call him Friday, and he's a great chap, except that he lives the same as an Injun."

The Arapahos stayed only a short time longer; then they rode away, back on the trail. They had a camp at Beaver Creek, three miles west, but were going to break it in the morning.

During the rest of the afternoon and during the evening the three proprietors of Beaver Creek station frequently chuckled at the picture of the scar-face Indian performing under the bidding of the Pain Killer. George had taken a dose of the Pain Killer once, for a stomach-ache. He said that a teaspoonful burned like fire. What a whole half pint would do might be imagined.

"It would have stretched stiff anybody but an Indian," declared Harry. "An Indian is tanned inside and out. I've seen one drink soapy dish-water, for the grease; and to swallow a piece of plug tobacco is a real sweet dessert."

In the morning Division Agent Bob Spotswood got off the stage from Julesburg. He made regular trips over the Denver division, back and forth. This time he brought great news.

"Holladay's on his way across," he announced to

Harry. "He passed Cottonwood yesterday, and they wired ahead to Julesburg to keep the line clear. He'll be coming right through to Denver, and you'll get him. Have your best team ready. The boys all along the road are laying their prize stock so as to make sure to catch him. He's in a hurry."

"What time, Mr. Spotswood?"

"About two hours before you expect him. But he'll probably want something to eat."

"What does he eat?" asked Harry, excited.

"The best there is. He's a good liver. He was raised in Missouri."

"Oh, gosh!" sighed Harry. "This is the off season. Haven't got anything but salt pork and bacon, bread and potatoes. Will he eat apple pie? I reckon maybe I can smother him a rabbit, Southern style."

"Do what you can," bade Agent Spotswood. "He's fond of the table. I'd like to make him pleased with this division. I hear tell that he's calculating on sending the Salt Lake coaches through this way and quitting the turn-off at Julesburg. That'll put Beaver Creek on the main line, and mean big business."

"Did you hear that?" reported Harry, after the stage had left, to Terry and George. "Beaver Creek station on the main line! We'll get all the Salt Lake and California travel, besides the Denver! Hooray! We'll be some pumpkins. Now it's up to us to make good—give him a pleasant memory of Beaver Creek. There's no knowing what he might do for us. He might make this a sort of summer headquarters. Wish our ducks didn't go away. But there's the slough;

he could turn it into a lake, and build himself a \$10,000 lodge on it; put on boats, and advertise it as a resort. Let's slick up the yard. We'll polish off Jenny and Duke, and tie red calico 'round their necks. There mustn't be a speck of dust on any of those stage animals, either. And after chores I want you two fellows to ride out through the brush and get the fattest rabbits you can find. No jacks; get cotton-tails."

"But there aren't any fat rabbits this time of year," objected George. "It's the wrong season."

"You'll find 'em," Harry encouraged. "Tell 'em Ben Holladay's coming. He's got to have fat ones. I reckon I'll beat up a batch of biscuits, too. And I'll try him with an apple pie. Those dried apples ought to be used some way."

"Harry's gone plumb wild," scoffed George, as, in the twilight this evening, he and Terry rode out on Jenny, the yellow mule, and one of the stage horses, with the musket and the shotgun, into the brush for rabbits. "You'd think the king of England was coming to stay a week!"

"Well, Mr. Holladay is a sort of king," Terry reminded. "He owns more horses than a king does, and he bosses all the way from the Missouri River to California."

"I don't guess he bosses the rabbits, though. They won't agree to sit down and get fat in ten minutes for him or anybody else. Not while Shep and the coyotes are about, and there's nothing but weeds to eat even if they do sit."

George was right. The rabbits that he and Terry

brought in were pretty poor specimens. At first Harry was disgusted ; then he cheered up.

“I’ll make a gravy of flour and water and bacon drippings. That’ll give ’em a fat and greasy look. Why, with plenty of gravy a cook can hide a multitude of sins. The biscuits and the pie will sure fetch him, too. The driver and the rest of us will have to get along with bacon and some corn pone.”

CHAPTER XII

THE STAGE KING COMES THROUGH

BEAVER CREEK home station turned out earlier than usual in the morning—"all samee like Fourth of July," grumbled George. But although George did considerable kicking and blustering, it was mostly pretend. His bark was worse than his bite, and he didn't have a lazy bone in his body.

Harry began to hustle at once; when he hustled, everybody hustled. He swept the dirt floor and the front "yard" with a damp broom, and took time only to "throw together" a breakfast for the in-stage.

By the time the stage arrived, things at the house were looking spick and span, and a brand new United States flag that he had in stock was flying from the pole over the door.

Jenny, the yellow mule, and Duke, the half-buffalo, had been groomed, after a fashion, and were uncomfortable in their bright calico neckties. Shep proudly wore a large red bow on his strap collar.

The second-rate team was to be put to the stage. The six mules that had brought Terry through the Indians, that time, were saved for a final currying, to go on with Ben Holladay.

It was great luck that the mules should be waiting in the corral. They came just right.

The dusty stage rolled in, and halted. Terry and George sprang to the traces. Six passengers stiffly emerged, blinking and weary. Two were women.

"What a neat station," Terry heard one say to the other. "It looks like new."

Having tossed down his lines, Driver Tommy Ryan leisurely followed; drew off his gloves and slapped them dustily. His eye roved about, taking in the decorated Shep and Duke and Jenny, and the traces of the broom.

"Who's running this joint now?" he asked. "Somebody got married?"

"Uh uh," grunted George, as he and Terry worked fast. "We're expecting company."

They hooked up the fresh team at once, so as to go in to breakfast and have everything clear.

"Is that the best coffee you've got on tap?" was inquiring Driver Ryan. "Tastes as though it was some left over from my last trip."

"Sorry, Tom," answered Harry. "But we're a little short on coffee and we have to save for Mr. Holladay."

"Well," growled Tom, "pass me another mule's ear full of the same, then. I'm only a driver and these here are only passengers."

"Seems like I smell hot bread baking," presently said Tom.

"Guess you do, Tom. I'm getting out a batch of biscuits for Mr. Holladay."

Tom snorted.

"See you're flying a new flag," he remarked. "What you doing? Celebrating a big victory somewheres?"

"Nope. We thought we'd put it out for Mr. Holladay."

Tom pushed back his stool, and strolled out.

"Lookie here," he greeted, when Terry and George joined him. "It's my turn for those mules, isn't it? What do you mean by hooking up those hosses, out of schedule?"

"The mules go on the Holladay stage, Tom," explained Terry politely. "You know Mr. Holladay's coming through to-day."

"Know it? O' course I know it!" retorted Tom. "If I didn't know it I'd be blind and deaf both. He was at Julesburg yesterday; and all the way from Valley every coyote has a knot in its tail so as to remind it not to take anything Ben Holladay wants!"

Tom drove on, in ill humor.

The two hostlers rubbed down the team that he had left; put a final polish on the six mules, cast a careful eye around the stable and corral to see that nothing was out of place, and went in to tidy themselves.

"When you get through, climb up on the roof, there, and keep a lookout down the trail," ordered Harry. "Don't dirty your clothes, either, and at first sign of dust yonder, yell to me, so I can slap on the rabbit and coffee and have the biscuits hot. You fellows will have to eat corn pone and bacon, if you eat at all. Don't you dare to touch the Holladay stuff. That's private feed."

Squatting upon the flat, hot, sun-baked sod roof was no sport. All the land lay shimmering, while they strained their eyes to catch the token of Ben Holladay's dust, in the east, down the road.

"See anything?" Harry called up every few minutes, while he clattered the stove lids and the dishes, below.

However, at last——

"I see him!" exclaimed Terry. "I see fresh dust, anyway."

"Where?"

"Over against those hills, where the road turns. See it?"

"Maybe it's nothing but more freighters."

"It's moving too fast. Look at it! It's traveling like a prairie-fire."

"Guess it's the 'old man,' all right," agreed George. "He's a-coming, Harry! He's a-coming!"

"Either that, or a big whirlwind," Terry added.

"Hooray! Climb down before he catches you. We don't want him to know we're expecting him. This is every-day life at Beaver Creek."

With another look, to be sure, they scrambled off the roof. Harry made them wash and shake again, and wipe the dust from their bacon-greased boots. The kitchen resounded with sizzling and sputtering

"How am I, boys?" Harry queried. "Is there any flour on my nose? Does this apron fit?"

There was no flour on his nose, and the gingham apron that covered him from flannel shirt to cowhide boots gave him a professional air. He limped

about hastily, from kitchen to dining-room and back.

"Jump like sixty for that team—be Johnny-on-the-spot; show him we're up to snuff, and the best outfit on the line, but don't gawk."

"He's getting close," warned George, in the doorway.

For the great Ben Holladay was coming on jumpety-jump. It was he, all right enough—a coach, tugged by six horses at a dead gallop, making naught of bouncing and pitching, and, by its headlong course, claiming the track.

Still at a gallop, the blowing, jingling team arrived, were pulled to their haunches by brake and lines, and, like the smartest kind of station-hostlers, Terry and George, standing ready at the roadside, charged to unhook before ever the lines had touched the ground or the dust had ceased swirling in.

The driver, an "extra" from down the line, sat his seat a moment while the coach door opened. First there stepped out a dignified darky servant, who, with bared head, stood at the doorstep as if to assist the other passengers. Then there stepped out in brisk fashion a rather heavy-set man in a broad-brimmed drab beaver hat of finest quality and light drab doe-skin overcoat. He had a masterful face, with dark, sharp eyes under bushy brows and downward curving mustache and shoe-brush whiskers. He was close followed by a slighter man, of short brown beard and linen duster.

They stamped their feet, cast a quick glance around, and hustled for the station doorway. The darky, car-

rying a couple of traveling bags, respectfully followed. Harry, in his apron, received them.

"Know who those are?" queried the driver, descending. "That first is Ben Holladay. T'other is Mister George Otis, general superintendent. Give these hosses a good rub-down. We came through as if the Injuns were chasing us. Better hook up the other team right away, too. There's no knowing what'll happen next."

"What's that? A special coach?"

"Yep. Has two seats and fitted up according. Holladay's the only one who uses it."

By the time Terry and George had put the glossy mules in, and entered the house, Mr. Holladay and Mr. Otis had washed and brushed, and were sitting at one end of the table. The driver sat in the middle, and the darky sat at the foot. So the others sat opposite the driver.

Mr. Holladay had removed his overcoat, of course. He wore a black broadcloth suit, of long coat, vest and trousers; and across the front of his vest hung a massy gold watch-chain. His white shirt bore handsome gold studs; his collar and cuffs were spotless. Mr. Otis was dressed in ordinary business clothes, of pepper-and-salt Scotch mixture.

Harry hovered over, anxious to please. Shep, the bow on his neck, sat bolt upright, gravely staring. The table was spread with a checkered oilcloth, and with its steaming dishes did itself proud.

"Will you try some of this rabbit, Mr. Holladay?" Harry was asking.

"No, thank you; not now. Not while the bacon lasts. But if somebody'll pass that corn pone this way——"

"Yes, suh; yes, suh," replied the darky. "Heah it is, suh."

"Coming your way, sir," added the driver, passing the dish of corn pone.

Mr. Holladay kept it, and proceeded to make his breakfast of bacon, corn bread and coffee. Mr. Otis seemed to prefer that, too. So it fell to the rest of them to eat Harry's rabbit and biscuits.

This was not according to schedule, and at sight of Harry's long face George nudged Terry, to call his attention. But Mr. Holladay went right ahead, eating the bacon and corn pone, until he had cleared the platters.

Then he heaved a satisfied sigh, wiped his mustache and whiskers with a fine linen handkerchief, pulled a gold ornamented cigar case from his pocket, offered a fat cigar to Mr. Otis and took one himself; and, rising, they strolled out.

"Say, got any bacon?" asked the driver, of Harry.

"No. Not a sliver."

"What's that I've been eating? Rabbit—and saleratus bread? Pie! No, thanks. Suppose I'll last through to the next eating house, but that's no fodder for a hard-working man."

He trudged out.

"Mistuh Holladay, he's very fond o' bacon an' cohn pone," complimented the darky, of Harry. "Yes, suh. You done pleased him."

"I'll be durned," said Harry.

Ben Holladay seemed in no hurry to travel on. He gave the driver one of the fat cigars; and he and Mr. Otis continued to stroll, inspecting the premises and the corral and the stock.

"Prime mules," he commented, eyeing the fresh team. "As good as any along the line, eh, George? Who are the hostlers—you two boys?"

"Yes, sir."

"Um. I guess you'll do. Where's your mother? I'd like to congratulate the lady of the house. There's one around, by the looks of things; and that's the best meal I've had since we left Kearney."

"I'm the lady of the house, Mr. Holladay," said Harry, with a bow.

"What's your name?"

"Harry Revere."

"If you've had your breakfast, and you're the lady, I suppose we should call you 'Harry-et,' eh?" smiled Mr. Otis.

"Haw, haw!" blared the driver. "That's another good one."

"Mistuh Otis, he's a funny man," informed the darky, aside, to Terry. "Done makes jokes, wherever he am."

"Anyway, you've got a first-class station here," proclaimed Ben Holladay. "Neat as a pin, and a credit to the Overland; yellow mule, half-breed buffalo, and all. It's quite a change from the last time I went through." He laughed. "I dare say you boys knew I was coming. Do the Indians bother you?"

"Not yet, Mr. Holladay."

"The trouble will be farther east, I think." He puffed at his cigar. "But you'll have to watch your stock. Are you three prepared to handle the main California travel, if it comes this way?"

"Yes, *sir!*" asserted Harry. "We'll handle all you send us. When is it due?"

"This fall, like as not. I've made arrangements with the post-office department to change the route of the mails." He looked at his thick watch. "All 'board," he snapped. "Pile in, George. Where's my coat, Eph?"

The driver, his cigar slanted rakishly in his mouth, pulled on his gloves, and climbed to the box. George stood at the lead mules' bits, and Terry passed up the lines. The two officials entered the coach, the darky had stowed the bags, and followed. The coach door slammed.

"Stand clear," instantly ordered the driver, and kicked the brake free. The mules sprang, he cracked his whip above them, and away they tore, at a run, whirling the great Ben Holladay on for the next stop.

"He's a corker, isn't he!" gasped George admiringly. "He's not old, either. Bet you he isn't more'n forty."

"Thirty-nine," said Harry. "Likes bacon and corn bread. Worth about a million. Divides his time between Washington, New York and out West. He's not a corker; he's a humdinger."

"I guess we pleased him, didn't we?" ventured Terry.

"Reckon we did," Harry chirped. "He left a twenty-dollar gold-piece under his plate. Maybe he forgot it, but maybe he won't miss it."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Bury it until we want it to celebrate with. It'll buy a heap of peanuts, boys. I haven't had a goober for three years."

CHAPTER XIII

CANNONEERS TO THE RESCUE!

STAGE King Ben Holladay returned through by night, so they did not see him again soon. But this fall the Salt Lake and California stages began their runs right up the south side of the South Platte, from Julesburg on past Bijou beyond Beaver Creek, to the base of the Rocky Mountains in northern Colorado.

The Denver line was changed from the cut-off at Bijou. The new main line lay only sixty miles north of Denver, and the Denver stages plied back and forth between Denver and Latham Junction of the main line.

The main line itself turned north at the Colorado foothills, for two hundred miles along the foothills, into present Wyoming, and struck the old road after crossing the mountains there. This did not shorten the distance any to California, but it took the stages out of the plains Indian country north of Julesburg.

The Overland gave up twenty-six stations, and a great amount of hay and grain and other stuff. That meant \$25,000 loss, Ben Holladay claimed—but he could not stand the Indians.

The scar-face Indian had not come back to Beaver

Creek station for more Pain Killer—or for anything else; but Beaver Creek did not miss him. Although the majority of the Utah and Oregon and California emigrants still used the old stage trail, in spite of the Indians, so as to stop at Fort Laramie trading post, the switching of the main line to the South Platte and “Bitter Creek” route brought a marked increase of business to Beaver Creek.

Freight for a dozen of the new stations rolled through, accompanied by the wagon-masters and bullwhackers; and these men now and then bought from Harry’s “grocery” stock. He was forced to lay in a supply of the lately invented “Bitters,” which was a favorite tonic.

All the Overland passengers, both ways (except those who traveled cheaply with bread and cheese and bologna sausage in their pockets), stopped off for breakfast or dinner.

The general officers now made Beaver Creek, on their trips through. There was Mr. Henry Carlyle, who was manager of the supply trains that hauled the freight for all the stations—lumber, hay, grain, provisions, and so forth.

There was Mr. David Street, the pay-master for the whole line. There was Mr. Bela M. Hughes, the Overland attorney or general counsel, with headquarters at the east end. There was the stock buyer, who purchased the horses; and the agent who took orders for clothing at only a little advance over New York prices—for the Overland attended to this, also; and the head carpenter; and the auditor; and others. The

Overland Stage Line was a great system, like a modern railroad.

The wild ducks visited the slough again, and fattened there. Along in October the freight wagons commenced to deliver the winter's supply of wood. Contractors had been cutting it all summer, in the Platte bottoms and in the mountains; and here it came, to be thrown down, cord upon cord, at the stations of the division, and stacked up by the station hands. Beaver Creek had a wood-pile as large as the house, and more would be needed before spring.

With the exception of a driving rain, which left the far distant Rocky Mountain range white against the horizon, the fall weather stayed fine and clear to Christmas. It keened gradually to frosty nights, but the days hung warm and sunny. Thanksgiving was celebrated with a whopping "private" dinner of buffalo roast, for which Harry sent to Denver, and mince pie and other odds and ends, which George's mother expressed up.

Christmas dawned bright. From American Ranch, the next station, twelve miles east, there arrived an antelope's fore-quarters, with the compliments of Mr. Kelly, the station-keeper. Terry and George had ridden down there several times, to swap news. No better meat than antelope roamed the plains. It beat the best mutton. And this, with another box from Denver, and a package from Terry's mother and father, out East, made a Merry Christmas at Beaver Creek.

Father Richards had recovered from his wound, but

he was not fit for active service yet, and rather expected to be invalided "home," which, said Terry's mother, meant Colorado. They would probably start in the spring. That was, indeed, good Christmas news.

"Weather breeder," had remarked Harry this morning, as he cocked his eye at the sky and the horizon.

After the late dinner they all stepped out, and could feel the change at once. The breeze had risen, and puffed chill and gusty from the northwest. The horizon all around had closed in—a grayness was creeping up into the sky, and the plains were moaning.

Harry shivered, half in earnest and half in pretense.

"She's a-coming, fellows. No more shirt-sleeves for a while. Look at those ducks making south! Geese, too! They're in a hurry. You'd better saw some more wood."

Evening closed in early; the air nipped. To-night while they sat close in front of the blazing fire-place, the wind whistled viciously past the eaves, the dried weeds on the sod roof rattled, and the kitchen chimney creaked.

Harry stuck his head out of the door. He drew back with his hair whitened.

"Snowing like sixty," he reported. "Br-r-r-r! Not extra cold, though. But as long as the wood holds out, I'd rather be a station-keeper than a stage driver for the next few months."

They needed a lot of blankets to-night. When they

turned out, before daylight, in the early morning, they could scarcely open the door, and the storm was raging in full fury.

The stage, with Bill Trotter on the box, arrived half an hour late. Driver and horses and coach were plastered white, but Harry had a hot breakfast of coffee and slapjacks, and, with stove and fire-place together, the station was warm.

The full onset of winter interfered with the freighting and the emigrant travel, but the stages never quit for weather. The drivers attached beaver-fur collars to their overcoats. The collars reached well above their ears. They donned buffalo-hide overshoes, worn fur side in, and shaggy fur caps, worn fur side out, except the ear tabs. Around their necks they wrapped shawls and scarfs, covering their faces to the eyes. Their hands were the only parts that suffered; for when the thermometer sank to thirty and forty below they usually arrived at the station with a finger or two frozen.

Even at that they got off the box only long enough to restore the circulation with snow and vigorous threshing, and drank a hasty cup of steaming coffee at the threshold.

"No fire for me, thank you," was the plea. "Once a fellow's used to the cold, he'll do better to stay in it until the end of his run."

Altogether, the drivers, bundled like mummies, were an odd sight. And so were the passengers, who stumbled stiffly out, so wadded with woollen underclothing,

blanket overcoats, buffalo robes, and buffalo overshoes wrapped in gunny-sacking, that they could scarcely move.

Terry and George did their outdoor work in buckskin vests worn over woollen underclothes, and blanket coats outside; three pairs of socks to the feet, and buffalo moccasins on the boots; buffalo-hide caps, with ear tabs; and silk gloves worn under heavy buckskin.

The buckskin was wind-proof, the silk was warm; but when hitching up the teams a fellow's fingers soon tingled and numbed, and were all thumbs. That was the coldest job—changing the teams.

The station duties increased. There were paths to the corral, and to the stable, and the well, and the wood-pile to be kept clean; wood to saw and split; stock to be well bedded and watered by pails. All the plains stretched white and cold. The slough froze solid; so did other water, even in the station house. Luckily the well was deep, and they managed to break the film which formed constantly.

They were pretty comfortable in the station. To be sure, water there froze while the hot fire raged in the fire-place; and a fellow's shins scorched while his back drew taut. The thick sod walls easily resisted the wind and frost; but the cold air sucked in around the wooden shutters and all the other little cracks, and swept across, up the flue.

The warmest spot was the bunks, under blankets and buffalo robes. And whew, but to roll out before daylight was tough!

However, that was an angle of the day's routine;

and, as Harry had said, the station job was better than the driving job.

In between the spells of storm and below zero, there were spells of sunshine and sparkling warmth, when the snow melted from the stage tracks and the rabbits came out to squat in the mouths of their burrows—ripe for rabbit pie.

Spring seemed to settle down early this new year of 1863. And it certainly was welcome, although, after all, Beaver Creek station had weathered the winter without much trouble.

In March the willow buds had swelled, the slough was mushy, a few geese had flown over, and George was keeping a close watch on the buds of a big cottonwood tree.

As old plainsmen know, veteran cottonwood trees are not to be fooled. They wait, and make their buds wear their winter flannels until there is no danger of taking cold.

Indians know this, too. Driver Tommy Ryan dropped a word of caution.

"It's getting near time for the plains Injuns to be raiding into the Ute country, I s'pose you understand. The south slopes of the hills are greenish, I hear tell; mountains are warmer than the plains. The young bucks will be getting restless. And when they don't find plunder in one place they're apt to swing 'round on their way home and pick it up in another."

"Anyhow, we can let Duke and Jenny graze out, can't we?" proposed Terry that night, in the station.

"The grass is showing green at the edge of the slough."

George returned from a trip down to the American Ranch, and brought some bits of news.

"They say the folks at that new Washington Ranch where the Moores are living have a great scheme. They've mounted a fake cannon in their yard. Just an old butter-churn on wheels, but it'll sure scare off the Injuns."

"Oh! Is that so?" mused Harry, and he fell to thinking.

In the morning he busied himself, tinkering mysteriously. It took two days to wind a length of stove pipe with rope, tar it over, plug one end, mount it on a carriage sawed from planks, and station the whole thing on the flat roof, with a pyramid of tarred clay cannon-balls beside it.

From below it did look like a real cannon. The layer of rope gave it the thickness of iron, and the tar covered the strands. The flag and the cannon made the station into a fort!

"Duke and Jenny will have the honor of grazing under protection of artillery," Harry chuckled. "Nobody's going to get ahead of Beaver Creek station. That beats a butter-churn."

So it would appear, to any reasonable person. Duke and Jenny were turned out the next day, and seemed to enjoy the change very much. Before daylight of the following morning, Terry was awakened by Shep scratching and whining at the door, evidently wanting to make a tour abroad. He had been sleeping in-

side all winter, and the nights were yet sharp and uncertain.

"Get down, Shep!" Terry hissed. He was so heavy with sleep that it was torture to stir.

"What's the matter?" drooned George, sleepy also.

"Shep's scratching to go out."

"Get down, Shep!"

But Shep was not that kind. He growled in his throat, and scratched more persistent.

"Aw," drawled George, "he smells a coyote." And George began to snore.

Drat such a dog! Harry likewise was gurgling, dead to the world. Terry found the floor, and staggered across.

"You stay out, now," he scolded, as he opened the door and Shep slipped by into the darkness.

Shep began to bark, in the distance. The first tinge of gray was paling the chill dusk, and Terry left Shep to his barking while he himself pattered back to the warm bunk. It didn't take him long to join the company of George and Harry, and make similar happy sounds.

Suddenly he wakened again, this time with a start. Harry was speaking quickly—half sitting up in his bunk amidst the gray, his blankets thrown partly off.

"Boys! Something's wrong!"

Shep's barking was furious—and instantly broke to a shrill yell of pain; there seemed to be hushed, rapid movement outside; not exactly heard, but *felt*.

"Wha' smatter?" stammered George, struggling to separate from his pillow.

Terry strained his ears; his heart thumped so that it deafened him. Harry sat poised, intent, listening, too. Then Shep bolted against the door, scratched blunderingly and whined in piteous fashion. Harry sprang to the floor.

"Indians! Somebody's after Jenny and Duke! Cannoneers to the rescue!"

He did not wait to dress—not even to put on his boots. He grabbed the shotgun from the wall, as he passed it. Terry, following, grabbed the musket. George, thoroughly awake to the word "Indians," charged after.

Harry flung back the door, and almost fell over Shep, lying at the threshold.

"Look out! Shep's hurt!" he called.

A wet snow was falling thickly. Shep was stretched weak and bloody, an arrow through his flank. Harry disappeared in the storm, around the corner of the house; and Terry and George boiled in pursuit, to back him up.

CHAPTER XIV

A CHAPTER OF SURPRISES

IN the mist along the slough not a sign of Duke and Jenny could be seen, through the snowflakes.

"Lost, strayed or stolen," pronounced Harry, who had arrived first. "Not even a track left. Great Scott! If that scar-face Pain Killer did this we'll hoist his scalp on the flag-pole."

"Terry and I'll chase 'em," panted George. "Come on, Terry! Get a hoss. We're not afraid of Injuns."

He ran for the stable.

"You take care of Shep—tell the stage driver where we are," called back Terry to Harry, and running after.

"Hi! Hold on a minute!" shouted Harry; but why "hold on," when, as George urged, over his shoulder:

"If we don't hurry, Duke'll be Injun meat. They'll kill him and eat him."

"They shore will," agreed Terry excitedly.

Harry's voice trailed them, but was a poor third in the race. George beat to the corral and stable. He peered along the rails, and wrenched open the stable door. His voice drowned Harry's.

"Gee whizz! Not a hoss or mule here!"

Terry arrived. Corral and stable were silent and empty; the corral rails on one side had been torn down; there was not a hoof—every animal had leaked out, no, had been driven out——

Harry arrived.

“Just as I thought,” he wheezed. “Blame the luck.”

“Didn’t they see the cannon?” complained George.

“Yes, but the cannon couldn’t see them. Shep did his best, though.”

“What’ll we do?” demanded Terry.

“Br-r-r-r! Put some clothes on,” Harry retorted. “I’ve been yelling at you every step. Do you reckon you can chase Indians through a snowstorm, riding in your bare feet and underclothes?”

“Jiminy! I plumb forgot,” confessed George, with a giggle. “You fellows sure look funny.”

“No funnier than you.”

And, indeed, they three did look queer—out here, bare-foot, in undress of faded red flannels, George with his revolver strapped around his waist, Harry and Terry lugging long-barreled guns.

“Guess it’s not funny to Shep, though,” blurted Terry, reminded. “Poor Shep! Hope he crawled inside. I’m going back.”

“I should say!” George added. “And suppose the stage came in!”

They scampered for shelter and Shep, Harry in the lead. Shep had crawled inside, and was licking at his wounds and biting at the feathered end of the arrow.

Before they did another thing they attended to him. Harry cut the arrow shaft in two, drew it out, and

washed off the blood while the boys petted the patient. They moved him to a piece of blanket in a corner near the stove, and Shep proceeded to nurse himself with his tongue again.

"No bones broken. It'll heal up quick," declared Harry. "Suppose he smelled Injun before Terry let him out. He knows a heap."

"Yes, siree! Shep knows a heap. Good old Shep! Started out to fight the Injuns all alone, didn't you, Shep?"

Shep threshed his shaggy tail, and whined.

"You fellows dress while I make a fire," Harry ordered, draped in a blanket, and hustling about the stove. "Better let your clothes dry on you. Br-r-r-r!"

"No stock to chore with this morning," uttered George. "Huh! That's a joke on the stage."

"Yes, a regulation spring joke," jerked Harry. "The company was used to that, on the other line. It was a fall and summer joke, too. Glad our top six mules were out, though."

"Duke's a goner, isn't he?" sighed Terry.

"He's meat. But I'll not give up my Jenny. They won't eat her—even an Indian couldn't do that unless he had a spare set of teeth to use while the other set was being sharpened."

"What are we going to do?" queried George.

"After you get a cup of coffee down you, you two'll have to walk to American Ranch and borrow a team, until we're re-stocked. I'll send word by the stages to Denver and Julesburg. But it will take a couple of

days before we're fixed out again. There'll have to be one change of team at least, here."

"Why can't we wait and ride on the stage to Bijou?"

"Because you can be carrying the word in one direction while the stage is carrying it in the other."

"All right. We're game," said Terry.

The kitchen stove was booming. They two watched the coffee while Harry washed and dressed.

"The stage may be late, anyway," observed George.

"Not for a little storm like this. Bill will bring her through on the dot."

The weather was not especially cold, but was raw and nasty, with the myriad large flakes swooping madly before a strong north wind. Wearing their winter costume of buffalo overshoes, fur coats belted with a strap, and fur caps, they set out for Kelly's or American Ranch, twelve miles down the Platte. George "packed" his precious pistol along.

"We ought to get there before noon," remarked George.

"Four hours, boy," corrected Terry. "We can make three miles an hour if we're any good. Then we'll ride back on the hosses."

Clump, clump; trudge, trudge, with the wet flakes pelting their cheeks and half blinding them. They puffed and sweat, and ploughed and slipped. There was not another sign of life within sight. They had the country all to themselves.

"We ought to be meeting the stage pretty soon, seems to me," George wheezed. "Wonder if we're on the trail."

"Dunno," wheezed Terry. "Can't see anything. Do you feel the ruts?"

"I did a while back. Thought I did, anyway. Funny if we got lost."

"Can't get lost. Keep a-going, and when we edge to the left we'll hit the river. Can't miss that, and when we hit the river we can't miss Kelly's. I know every bend of the river."

"There's no sense in following close to the river, though," puffed George. "It's too crooked. We'll head straight and make short-cuts. I don't want to walk this way all day. Wish I'd left my old scalp-getter at home."

Clump, clump; trudge, trudge; puff, puff; wet inside and outside, but, thanks to their hide clothes, not wet through. However——

"This stuff I've got on weighs a ton," panted George. "I'd hate to be a buffalo the year 'round. Where are we, do you suppose? I don't believe we're on the trail."

"Neither do I. Doesn't matter, though. When we think we're far enough we can swing over. We ought to be almost to those bluffs where the Injuns tried to corral Bill Trotter and me."

Clump, clump; trudge, trudge; and puff, puff.

"Say! What's that? The stage?" suddenly uttered George.

"Where? Over there?" They halted to peer. "Looks like it. Yes, sure! Strike over. We aren't so very far off the track."

They struck over. The stage was moving slowly;

but stage it was, snow-plastered and huge. It gradually sharpened. George exclaimed:

"It's going the wrong way. That's the hind end."

"Come on!" bade Terry. "What's the matter with it?" And they broke into a clumsy trot.

The stage had shifted course again. It seemed to be wandering, like a ship without a rudder. They yelled vainly, to attract its attention; but thanks to its erratic movements they caught it, and again hailed breathlessly.

"Whoopee! Hey!"

The stage was enclosed tightly against the storm. The driver, a snow-covered heap, was on the box; his whip drooped and his snowy lines extended loosely to the snowy six horses.

The team stopped willingly, and stood hunched and steaming. There was only a muffled groan from the driver.

"Is that you, Bill? What's the matter? Where you going?"

Bill Trotter—if it was he—mumbled weakly. The team started, but Terry ran to the bits.

"Is that you, Bill? Are you sick? Want help?"

"Where am I? Can't see." And Bill lunged sideways, helpless.

"What had we better do?" stammered George.

"Drive it in, of course. Get him inside first, I reckon. Wait till I set that brake." And Terry nimbly climbed part way up and kicked the brake tight. "Now lend a hand. Hello, Bill. We'll put you inside. Know us? We're the boys from Beaver Creek."

The snow and wind flattened the voices issuing on short breath. Bill may have understood. He was limp—evidently sick. The team shook themselves and were impatient.

"Lend a hand," ordered Terry. "I'll shove his feet over and you steady him. Easy, now."

Driver Trotter managed to help himself a little. They got him down, in a heap. George beat on the stage door.

"Open up. How many in there?"

"Six," answered a voice, muffled and thick. "Where are we? At the station?"

"Not yet. Be there in a few minutes. Here's another passenger."

The stage door opened. They directed Bill's feet, and from behind hoisted him inside, where all was dark amidst the hurtling flakes.

"Sick man. He's the driver," explained George. "But we'll take you on. Look after him, will you?"

"Who are you?"

"Just some station hands. Station's only a little way. It's all right."

There were muffled exclamations; but Terry slammed the door shut on Bill's heels. He swung aboard and grasped the lines and whip. George darted around and plumped into the other half of the seat.

"She's one of the new coaches, isn't she? Can you navigate her?"

"Sure thing. Why not?" Terry confidently released the brake, tautened the lines and tried to crack the whip. "Yip! Gwan with you!"

The horses obediently started; the coach rolled silently. It was one of the new big fellows recently put on by Ben Holladay: three seats inside, and a seat on top, back of the box, and knee-higher than the box. Held nine passengers, three on the top seat, and by stowing two more on the box, with the driver, would carry fourteen.

Terry felt rather grand to be driving such a coach. Lucky that he and George were on hand, too; for the air had stiffened, the flakes were hard and stinging, and the wind blew much colder. By the tracks that had been made, the horses were beginning to wander, without a driver to hold them to the storm—and the whole load might have been adrift.

He himself had some difficulty in keeping the team headed right. The snow pellets stung, the wind nipped, and the horses wanted to turn aside.

"Hep with you! Hi!"

The coach now and then rocked and pitched. The landscape, such as might be seen, looked all alike—just a snowy expanse, broken by high, hummocky shrubs.

"I don't believe we're on the road at all, yet," spoke George.

"Can't tell the road from anything else; but if we keep heading into the wind we'll get somewhere. Gwan!"

"The horses ought to know their way."

"The trouble is, they want to turn all the time."

"Maybe the wind has changed and we're going crooked," proffered George, after a time. He was

growing anxious—and so was Terry. “Where’s that station? We’ve come far enough, haven’t we?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been expecting to strike it.”

“Better let me drive for a spell.”

“All right. My hands are about numb. Whew! Watch out they don’t sneak to one side on you.”

George finally got the hang of the six lines. The horses took their own plodding gait, and all that he needed to do was to hold them up and hold them straight. They were tired horses, and would gladly have turned tail.

George drove. Terry threshed his arms till his fingers were limbered; then he drove.

He was getting more anxious. There seemed to be no end—nothing ahead. They certainly were not on the road, and they certainly had missed Beaver Creek. Or else Beaver Creek lay farther than they had figured. Of course, the horses walked most of the time, and progress was slower than might be reckoned from the box.

The horses plodded, the heavy coach creaked and lumbered, Terry urged the snow-plastered team, and he and George peered before and right and left.

“We’re sure lost,” asserted George. “We’re coming from nowhere and going nowhere. We ought to have been smack into the river before this. It’s north and that’s where we’ve been heading. Blame those hosses! Don’t they know when they’re on the road?”

“How do we know they don’t know, when we don’t know ourselves?”

“All we can do is to keep a-going. If we stop we’re

liable not to get started again. Wonder what the passengers are thinking."

"If they'll sit long enough, we'll take 'em through," said Terry doggedly.

But he was waxing more and more anxious. He and George had been driving hours, as seemed to him. If they were driving in a circle—wow! The horses could not hold out forever. The snow covered all tracks; changed the landscape completely.

"Either the wind's switched or we've switched. That's what I think," George uttered presently. And he added, on a sudden: "It's quitting. It's going to clear. If we can only see the sun——!"

The flakes were drifting larger, in a final flurry. The wind had dropped considerably, and the leaden sky was brightening. Objects began to stand out. Terry pointed with his whip.

"There are some hills, all right enough. I don't believe we've passed Beaver, after all! That looks like the Platte, too. If we aren't on the road we're mighty near it."

The horses had pricked their drooping ears, raised their heavy heads, and tugged stronger to a laboring trot.

"That wind is more south than north, boy!" exclaimed George. "Look at the bright spot, where the sun is!" He cried out wildly. "Beaver? Gwan! Do you know where we are? That's Bijou! That's what it is! Bijou! We're twenty miles beyond Beaver. Now I see the station."

"But how did we pass Beaver?"

"Must have made a thundering big circuit. How'd we cross Beaver Creek?"

"I dunno," confessed Terry. "We went down into something and out again, I remember, away back. Huh! I tell you: we've been forcing the hosses into the wind, and edging southward, right along, instead of northward. Passed clean behind Beaver Creek station; so the hosses struck on for Bijou, but they didn't want to. The wind's not due south. It's a bit south of west. Drift along, hosses! Good boys! You'd had to come here anyway. Me, I'm hungry enough to eat old Jenny."

"So am I," George admitted. "Eat her raw, on the hoof."

Bijou station it was, twenty miles west of Beaver Creek station! The horses strove gallantly; and, as the sun commenced to peep out, Terry, sitting in true professional style, with George, arms folded, posing as messenger, drove at a rattling trot to the end of his "run."

"Hi-i yup!" And he braked and gathered the lines to toss them down.

The station hands jumped to catch them and unhook the wet team.

"Hey! What are you doing up there?" challenged the station-keeper, appearing with another man. "Where's Trotter?"

"Inside. He's sick." And Terry descended from one end of the box, George from the other.

"Where did you take charge? At Beaver?"

"No. We were hoofing it to Kelly's for some stock.

The Injuns cleaned us out last night. Found the coach going every which way, off the road, between Beaver and Kelly's. What time is it?"

"Near noon. Did you come straight through?"

"Straight as we could, but we never saw Beaver." Terry staggered. He had done most of the driving, and was as tired as the horses. "You've got Bill to 'tend to, and six passengers to feed."

"We'll give 'em the best we've got. You and that other cub had better go on in."

"Good work, boys," praised the second man, who proved to be Mr. Alex. Benham, the new division agent.

They lingered a minute to see the stage opened. The passengers began to bundle out, right glad to be in safety. There were two men; then Driver Bill, limp and wabbly, and supported by the two men. Then another man, in shawl and army overcoat, who helped a woman out. And, as the pair turned and straightened, Terry uttered a yelp of astonishment; made a jump for them.

"Ma! Dad! How'd you get in there?"

"Well, for goodness' sake!"

CHAPTER XV

TERRY IS A KING WHIP

Now it was after dinner. Driver Trotter had been put to bed, to recover from the colic that had so doubled him up, but with the food and the rest, and the glad excitement of meeting his "folks," Terry was a new man. So was George, his staunch assistant. Nothing could phaze George.

Father and Mother Richards were booked clear through to California. They had sold their interests in the mine, the Stantons probably were going to sell theirs; and Father Richards was taking a trip across partly for his health and partly to look around. He had been honorably discharged from the army; his leg had given out and his wound had farther crippled him. His soldier days were over, at present.

There was so much to talk about that Terry was not half through the budget of chatter; but the stage was standing ready, with five fresh mules hooked to it. Shucks! He might not see the folks again for a month or two.

Agent Benham called him.

"Can you take this stage on to Latham?" Mr. Benham asked abruptly.

"Why—sure thing, Mr. Benham."

"Good! The coach from the west hasn't turned up yet. It's long past due and must have had a breakdown somewhere. The extra driver who's supposed to be here went to a dance up the Bijou last night, and hasn't reported, either. And we can't trust any of these hostlers; they're not driver stuff for that road ahead."

"But we've left the station-keeper all alone at Beaver, Mr. Benham."

"I'll fix that. I'll send a team and a couple of hostlers to him right away, and soon fill him out with plenty of help. If you'll drive on to Latham and want to take your pardner along on the box with you, I'll dead-head you both through to Salt Lake and return. The passengers spoke of making up a purse for you, but the Overland company appreciates your pluck and decision in bringing the coach in, and you deserve a vacation. There was a woman aboard, and considerable valuable express, not to speak of Bill. Chances are you saved his life. Anyway, Ben Holladay is on the lookout for that kind of work. The company will round-trip you to Salt Lake, on full wages, expenses paid. That'll get you acquainted with the road on the Eastern and Central divisions, make an Overland man of you, and you can have a good visit with your father and mother on the way. Same as to your pardner. What do you say?"

"I'd drive to Latham without that, Mr. Benham," stammered Terry. "I don't want extra for it. But, of course, we'd be plumb tickled to make the Salt Lake

trip. I should say yes! I wouldn't want to leave Harry in the lurch, though, that is all."

"That will be arranged. We'll watch out for Beaver Creek till you get back. All right. Tell your pardner, and climb aboard. You've got a spike team, but the road's plain, and this snow has settled the sand, so you'll make Latham without trouble."

Terry rushed for George, and George performed a silent little war-dance.

"We're going on to Salt Lake with you, Ma," Terry announced. "I'm to drive as far as Latham. You and dad sit outside."

"Oh, Terry!" And his mother evidently was all swelled up with pride and delight. His father clapped him on the shoulder.

"You talk as if you were quite a man, already."

"All 'board!" summoned Driver Terry. "Stage for Latham."

He and George climbed to the box. His father and mother took the elevated seat behind. The other passengers entered, below. The lines were passed up, the hostler at the bits of the lead mules sprang aside, Terry kicked the brake free, whirled the lash of Bill Trotter's handsome whip, and the heavy coach moved to the plunge of the well-trained team.

"Hi! Wait a minute!" arose the shout behind. He pulled the team down, and set the brake again.

Mr. Benham was running after.

"Here's your pass. I'm going the other way. And here's expense money for incidentals. The pass guarantees your meals at the stations, as employees of the

company. Take a week in Salt Lake. Good-bye."

"Thanks, very much, Mr. Benham. We'll be back, all right. Gwan with you, mules! Yip!" And they were off once more.

"Let's see?" asked George.

Terry straightened out the team, and handed the paper to him.

Pass bearers, Terry Richards and George Stanton, employees of the Overland Stage Line, Beaver Creek station, to Salt Lake and return, including Denver, with subsistence en route.

ALEX. BENHAM,
Agt. Julesburg-Denver Div.

"What's that 'subsistence'?" queried George, reading.

"Same old fat bacon served other side up, I reckon," laughed Terry.

It was a spike team that he was driving, of five mules. There were the two wheel mules, and the two swing mules, and a single mule as the leader. The road from Bijou to the next station, Fremont's Orchard, was through such a bare, sandy, desolate country, of heavy pulling, that a spike team was rather more easily managed than sixes.

But the snow had settled the sand, the sun shone warmly, and at times the mules broke into a trot. Some persons would have called this stretch of sixteen miles very monotonous. There was nothing to see, nearer than the mountains, still far westward. How-

ever, to be a regularly appointed driver, "boss" of a fourteen-passenger coach, with one's own father and mother sitting close behind and watching a fellow drive like a king whip, struck Terry as being about the last word in fun.

They forged on, mile after mile.

"Going to let me drive where the road's good?" asked George.

"Can't do it, George. I'm responsible for the load."

"What's the schedule, anyway?"

"They're allowed five hours. But I guess we can clip that."

"Take your time, Terry," his father cautioned. "We're late and you won't be expected to make the schedule."

"Keep a-going, that's Overland orders," replied Terry. "Drivers are expected to make schedule if they can. If they can't, they hear from Holladay."

"There comes the other coach."

So it did, at last. In a wider part of the road, before, it halted, so Terry halted opposite, and saluted with his whip.

The other driver, who was "Rowdy Pete," stared and grinned. The passengers atop also grinned.

"What's this? A cub outfit traveling go-as-you-please?" "Rowdy Pete" bantered. "Where's the regular coach?"

"You're looking at it," informed Terry.

"Didn't know but what you were special, with Ben Holladay inside, and this is to-morrow's coach ahead of time," said Pete sarcastically.

"That's better than yesterday's coach behind time to-day," Terry joked. "This coach had a sick driver, other side of Beaver. Where have you fellows been?"

"Busted down. Any war news?"

"Not this trip; but plenty's coming."

"Can I trade you for a chaw of tobacco?"

"Nope, thank you," laughed Terry.

"Rowdy Pete" sprang his brake, his team surged forward. "So long," he bade, with raise of whip. "So long," answered Terry, starting his own team. And they parted in true professional fashion.

Fremont's Orchard was reached in four hours and a half. It was named "Orchard" because of a little group of cottonwood trees, the first trees in the sixteen miles from Bijou.

Terry stopped only fifteen minutes, or long enough for a cup of coffee all 'round. He intended to get to Latham, twenty-three miles, by dark and in time for a good night's rest, if he could. The road was now better, and they easily made Eagle's Nest, eleven miles.

Half way to Latham, from Eagle's Nest, the sun had set. Presently he had to send George down to light the coach lamps. The horses knew the road better than he; he had only to let them go; and with lamps burning and harness gaily jingling, in the early darkness he delivered his load safely at Latham.

"Bet you're tired, boy," proffered George, as Terry threw aside the bunch of lines, and relieved his aching arms. "How far've you held the ribbons? About fifty miles?"

"Only thirty-nine, this last stretch from Bijou. You

spelled me on that first stretch, you know. Fifty miles is no run at all. When a fellow doubles up and drives a hundred miles without rest, then he can talk. That's what Sol used to do."

"Well, seems to me we've been driving about a week," George declared. "Started out before breakfast to go to American Ranch, and here we are away in the other direction bound for Salt Lake! I'd give a dollar to know what Harry's thinking, and whether Jenny or Duke has come home. And how Shep is."

At any rate, bed felt mighty soft; and there was no hurry about getting up, either, for the Salt Lake and California stage out of Latham did not start until near noon.

Latham proved to be as busy a place as Julesburg had been. There were only the station house and stables, but in the morning four coaches stood waiting their turn: two for Denver, sixty miles south, up the Platte, with delayed mail and passengers from east and west; one for Kansas, and one for Utah, Nevada and California.

All the mail that came in had to be assorted and transferred; and here passengers changed, to continue in one direction or another. So Latham, located where the South Platte curved sharply to the southwest, for its head in the mountains, was an important junction point.

"How far to Salt Lake, now?" asked George.

"Five hundred and seventy miles—about as far as to the Missouri River."

"What'll we do? Ride outside all the way? I'll stump you."

"Of course," answered Terry. "That's the only place. We want to see all we can. If there's no room on the seat we'll ride on the top."

The Denver and the Missouri River stages had rolled out. The west-bound driver was about to climb on.

"All 'board!" he shouted. "Salt Lake, California and way-points! All 'board!"

CHAPTER XVI

HANK CONNER DOES HIS BEST

THE coach was one of the old reliable nine-passenger kind, with space for two on the box with the driver. The boot behind was crammed full of mail and delayed express, and several sacks and valises were tied on the flat top. But there were only four passengers (not counting the two dead-heads): Terry's father and mother, and a woman alone, and a man who grabbed the box seat before anybody else could.

He had been sitting and holding it half an hour—a smartish, youngish man in a large-checked, sporty overcoat loosely belted, and a black-banded white hat, and a flashing diamond ring on his little finger.

As he occupied half the box, Terry and George promptly cleared a place for themselves amidst the baggage on the top, and, facing fore and aft, sat back to back, with their feet braced against the rail.

The driver was Hank Conner—and he was a “daisy,” as the new slang put it: one of the jolliest and very best drivers on the whole Overland line. You could see that by the way he cocked his hat at a rakish slant, sat upright with his feet well planted, assorted

the lines between the fingers of one hand and shook out his whiplash.

He shot a shrewd glance at the man in the checkered coat, and another at the boys on the top.

"All ready, you cubs?" he demanded.

"Let her go, Hank!"

"Clang!" went the brake. "Crack!" snapped the lash above the lead horses; and the coach jumped.

They were off for the mountains, and the other side. First run, thirty-five miles, to Laporte.

"Can you swim?" called back Hank, over his shoulder.

"Yes, sir."

"But we'd rather not," added George.

"Better stand up, then, so the water won't be over your heads. 'Fraid those folks inside are going to get wet. You see, this coach hasn't been calked yet, ferry-boat style. Has too much windows." And—"Feet up!" yelled Hank, as the road suddenly ended at the river.

The Platte River had to be crossed by the west-bound coaches. There was no bridge, the water eddied darkly without sign of ford except the road that entered on this bank and came out on the other bank; with crack of whip and sundry yelps and shouts, Hank sent the team straight in at a trot. They splashed high, the coach dipped, the current surged against the wheels, rose to the body—the inside passengers cried in alarm. "Wet feet," laughed Hank. "They ought to 've wore gum boots!"—the coach hesitated, but he never quit with whip and voice—the team snorted and

tugged and strained—and out clambered the dripping leaders, and the dripping swing pair, and the dripping wheel pair, and the coach followed.

"Twenty feet deeper and we'd been afloat," remarked Hank. "Everybody satisfied?"

"Are you all right, Ma?" called Terry, over the edge.

"Yes. But the water came inside. It covered the floor."

"Never mind, ma'am," encouraged Hank. "It'll go out the same way. Ben Holladay's arranged for that. You don't have to open the door."

The horses toiled up a little grade, with Hank letting them take their time.

"This is what you call staging in this country, is it?" asked the passenger on the box.

"Yes, sir. That's what it's supposed to be."

"And those are good horses, according to the notion?"

"Averagely fair," said Hank. "Not to brag of, but averagely fair."

The man in the checkered coat laughed to himself.

"Oh, my word!" he uttered. "If you could see the way they do things where I come from!"

"And where might that be?" inquired Hank.

"Abroad, my man. On the continent. The land of the real coaching."

"Staged some, have you??" inquired Hank.

"Thousands of miles. Such coaches, such horses, and such drivers! All this is pretty crude, you know. I rather expected something better. 'Pon my word, I did."

"Well, we do the best we can," apologized Hank. "With only a hundred or so coaches and two or three thousand animals Ben Holladay ain't to be blamed. He's to be pitied. We don't aim to beat Yurope. We just aim to get through, once in a while."

"And the roads! Bless you, they don't compare with the turn-pikes in old England."

"Nope," said Hank. "For a small stretch, like from Atchison to Californy, they're right raw, I reckon. We sorter counted on the Injuns to smooth 'em down and keep 'em fixed, but the buff'ler and antelope cut 'em up in wet weather."

George chuckled, and nudged Terry. Hank was having a little fun.

"Those horses don't seem to have much action," pursued the passenger on the box. "Dear me! I'd like to show you the teams in the old country. Spankers, every one. Or maybe you're a bit afraid to let these nags out—might get away from you. I notice you're a careful driver."

"Those are orders. We have to be saving of the hoss-flesh," answered Hank. "Perhaps you've handled the ribbons yourself."

"Handled the ribbons? Bless my heart! I'm what you'd call a 'king whip,' my lad. I'm rather a fancy. Can turn a coach and eight on a shilling."

"Do tell!" sighed Hank.

The man wriggled restlessly.

"Can't you show a little speed?" he asked.

"I might be able to stir 'em up a trifle, down hill,"

assented Hank. "So they'd keep out the way of the coach."

They were already proceeding across a level space, at a lively trot, with Hank driving perfectly. Every trace was taut, and each animal was doing its duty. He occasionally touched up one, and then another, to straighten them to their work.

And a glorious gait this was, through the crisp sunshine, toward the snow-crested mountains, with the harness jingling and the coach rumbling and rocking, and the landscape flowing by on either hand.

Up a long, easy grade they swept, at slackened pace.

"Dear me!" complained the passenger on the box. "How long will we be in getting to the next station? I'm in a hurry, but at this rate—my word!"

"First out station is twelve miles. We calculate to make it in less'n ten hours," asserted Hank. "Some people prefer to walk, and some think riding's easier on the feet. They can take their choice."

"Ten hours?" blurted the passenger. "A man could do it much quicker afoot. And they call this 'staging'! I declare!"

The coach topped the crest of the grade. The team showed not a trace of sweat—which proved the kind of driver that Hank was. He had come seven miles in an hour, and not pushed his horses.

Now a long, curving descent lay before, through numerous cuts, and skirting hill-slope and deep creek bed.

"Seeing you're in a hurry——" drawled Hank, and suddenly he yelped loudly, shook his lines, and flung

his lash in a resounding crack. The startled team leaped like one horse; the coach jerked to the leap; down it rushed, twitched by the galloping six.

George and Terry collided, and, grasping whatever was nearest, hung tight. The passenger's feet flew up, and he, too, grabbed. Away sailed his hat.

"Pick it up coming back," rapped Hank. "Yip with you! Yip! Get out o' here! Dog-gone such a team—can't scarcely force 'em out of a walk! Yip!"

"'Pon my word!" gasped the passenger. "Hold on."

"Hold on yourself," retorted Hank. "Just hold on, and I'll get you through before supper. I'd hate to be caught on this road after dark. Didn't know you were in a hurry. Sorry I've such a slow team, but I'll help 'em all I can."

His lash cracked again and again; he yelled and whooped. The gait seemed terrific. The coach bounded and swerved, the harness jingled furiously, the baggage tossed—and so did the "top" passengers. Curves were taken on two wheels; several times it looked as though the coach was going straight over a sheer bank, into the creek below—but somehow it always escaped.

"Gee whizz!" stammered George, who was facing rearward. "What they doing? Running away?"

Anybody might think so, but Terry speedily saw different. He was a "whip" himself, and knew the kinks. The team was by no means running at large. Hank made no special showing, yet he kept the upper hand all right. The horses were never out of control;

not for a moment. The lax lines were always tightened at the proper instant to swing the leaders and hold them to their feet; the brake occasionally ground, at the curves; the horses knew their business also—and when they ran free they made the curves without guiding. The heavy coach thundered after.

“Hi! Hold on!” implored the passenger. “This is no way to drive, my man. We’ll all be upset.”

“I’ll get you through, if nothing busts,” Hank comforted. “Mebbe you’d like to take the ribbons. There’s a bad curve ahead. I’m doing the best I can, but I’d like to learn. Durn such a slow team anyhow. Ben Holladay ought to be ’shamed of himself! Lucky we’re going down hill. Will you change seats? I’m ’fraid of that curve. I shorely am. It’s the kind that needs a smart driver who can handle hosses.”

The passenger only clung hard and made no move to take the lines. Hank’s lash shot out again, and he yelped. The curve was close before—seemed to be almost at right angle, with a shoulder on the right and a steep slope dropping downward on the left.

The leaders hit it—veered sharply, their hoofs sliding; around they sped, around sped swing team and pole team, Terry heard the brakes bite, but the coach, changing direction in a hurry, tilted sideways on two wheels, his heart popped into his throat—and with a wild yell of fright the box passenger hurdled overboard.

He made a prodigious frantic jump for safety, and went rolling and plunging down the steep slope, ploughing the bush and gravel. The coach righted to

four wheels again, Hank began to check the team; and gazing back they had just time to see the passenger come to a stop, and scramble up and stare about.

"Whoopee!" cheered Hank, bringing the team down to a brisk trot, here at the foot of the grade. "I was trying my level best and he gets plumb disgusted with the whole shebang and off he jumps! Well, well!"

"Aren't you going to wait for him, Hank?"

"Not by a jugful. 'Tain't far to the station. He said he could hoof it quicker than the way these here Western stages travel, and like as not he can. So you two fellows can okkipy the box, if you want to. He left quite a hole."

They crawled forward. The coach top was littered with the shaken baggage.

"All right below?" hailed Hank, of the inside passengers.

"Yes; but what was the matter?"

"Oh, nothing. We had a man in a hurry, but he's gone on afoot. Once in a while a driver gets a smart-alick like that," added Hank, to his box company, "who lays out to tell us all he knows and a bit more—but he doesn't last long. He empties his brains through his mouth and then the atmosphere caves him in. Fact is," continued Hank, "I don't much believe in heaving bouquets or brickbats promiscuous till you're sure of your aim. How-some-ever, in my private opinion, Ben Holladay's Overland has other staging, the world over, licked to a frazzle. It's got the coaches, the men, and the animals, and it makes a 2,000-mile schedule right to the dot, barring accidents."

"Golly, but we shore came down that hill!" George enthused.

"Shucks, now! That wouldn't be a wrinkle on the Pioneer line—the Californy end of the Overland. There's where they have staging! Twenty-four passengers to a coach, mountain roads of a hundred miles of solid granite, drivers in yaller gloves and silk shirts and polished boots, and hosses kept at a dead gallop mile in and mile out, with only six inches to spare for the outside wheels, sometimes. Schedule, twelve miles an hour—seventy miles, including stops, in ten hours! That's staging."

At the trot they drew into the first out station, which was only a small ranch where change of horses was kept.

"There'll be a pilgrim along after a while," Hank announced. "He got off to look for his hat, I reckon, a small piece back. May want to take the next stage east."

"What kind of lookin' man, Hank?"

"Dunno how he looks now."

In five minutes they all were moving again, behind a fresh team of four. The route led steadily for the mountains, which waxed larger but no nearer, as is the habit with mountains.

Twenty-five miles distant they were still, said Hank. Laporte, the home station at the end of the run, was not far from them, but could not be reached until after dark.

The sun was setting behind the snowy range when the next change of team was made.

"What's the war news, Hank? I haven't seen a paper less'n a week old for a coon's age."

"Blamed if I know. I set out to take the Denver paper, but somebody steals it 'fore it gets to me. They're still fighting, though."

"Any Injun troubles down the line?"

"A passel o' varmints cleaned out Beaver Creek, these boys say, but didn't kill anybody. What's the news up the line?"

"You're like to run into a high old time. Slade and some of his gang are on a tarant'lar-juice rampage at Laporte, I hear tell. Sorter've took possession."

"Sho', now," remarked Hank, as he gathered the lines. "I reckon if we mind our own business we'll keep our scalps. G' lang, mules!"

"That's great doings for a division superintendent," he volunteered, to the boys, as the coach rolled on. "Slade's a good man [it was the same Slade whom Terry had seen at Julesburg]; he pacified Julesburg and the old Rocky Ridge Division, but since he's been transferred to this North Platte Division he's turning bad. Has a notion that he owns the country—'specially when he fills up on forty-rod pizen. That's the trouble with some of these men who are free with a gun. They get so they think they have a license to shoot up the landscape whenever they please."

The coach lamps had been lighted. The darkness thickened rapidly, while the coach lunged up hill and down, on a never-ending road bordered by the whitely gleaming sage. George nodded and drooped, and leaned against Terry. Terry nodded—he scarcely

could hold his eyes open, and finally he let them stay shut. There wasn't much to see.

He and George slept, bolstering each other up; for the next that they knew a ferocious yell rang in their ears, jarring them both awake.

It was only Hank's stage-driver whoop of "Whoo wah-ah-ah-ah!" signaling the station. In the near distance before there blinked several lights.

"Laporte, then supper, then bed for Yours Truly," spoke Hank. "I missed my sleep complete last night."

In the approach to Laporte a scattering of log cabins and other shacks was dimly revealed—for Laporte had been a boom town during the Pike's Peak rush in 1859. But the chief signs of life seemed to be centered around the station house. Yells and loud laughter, wild cheers and singing and revolver shots sounded, figures crossed and recrossed the lights——

"Some fellows on a tear, sure enough," said Hank. "You and the rest just mind your own business and keep in the station house until the next stage pulls out, and you won't come to any harm. The boys respect women."

As he set the brake, the stage was greeted by a volley, right, left, and straight up, punctuating the darkness with red streaks. Hank coolly tossed his lines to the hostlers, followed by the two boys, climbed down into a half-circle of cheering, roughly-dressed men, and opened the coach door.

"This way into the station, ladies and gents," he

bade. "Go right along. Supper's ready. You'll be called at proper time."

Terry's father stepped out first——

"Here's a blue-coat," yelled somebody.

Terry's mother stepped out second——

"Make way for the lady!"

The woman with the baby stepped out third——

"An' don't wake the baby!"

With Hank leading, and Terry's father bringing up the rear, the little party hustled through the lane that had been formed, into the station house.

The stench of liquor hung in the air, but the crowd seemed good-natured.

CHAPTER XVII

A WILD NIGHT RIDE WITH SLADE

THE station-keeper's wife had prepared the supper.

"You'll have to excuse things," she proffered as she finished setting the table. "We're considerable upset. Jack Slade and a party are on a rampage. They've been here all day, getting worse and worse. They've cleaned out the grocery store—just thrown stuff every which way, and ducked the storekeeper in the vinegar barrel. It's the liquor. Slade's awful when he's got liquor in him. You won't any of you be harmed, though, if you just go your way and pay no attention. But all this confusion has sort of spoiled supper. I guess the company won't keep Slade long, if he acts this way at the stations. He ought to be arrested and jailed—but seems like everybody's afraid of him."

The supper tasted good, although it was eaten rather nervously. The call for the stage was long delayed. Outside, the tumult continued—rough talking, singing, hap-hazard shooting, scuffling and running about. Hank Conner had gone to bed. As he explained, he had to have his sleep, for he went out in the morning. The Terry party sat, waiting and listening.

"Maybe we'd better stay over and take another stage, after those men have left," proposed his mother anxiously. "We can get beds here, can't we?"

"Oh, I don't dare stay," faltered the other woman, who had the baby. "I've got to go right on. My husband is sick—he's expecting me."

"We'll all go on," said Terry's father. "We certainly won't let you leave alone. Besides, we might be held up here several days, if the west-bound stages happen to be full. If we gave up our seats we'd have to take our chances. That's the company rule."

They waited, and listened, and dozed. At last the call came.

"All 'board," summoned the station-keeper hastily, through the doorway. "Get right in. There's nothing to be afraid of, so get right in. Pay no attention to those fellows. They're acting rough, but it's mostly horse-play."

Out they went. A half-moon had risen, and by the light of that and of the coach lamps the scene was not very encouraging. Six mules had been put to the coach. The six were plunging and kicking—they appeared to be only partly broken to harness, and there was a hostler hanging to the bits of each pair, trying to hold them.

A yelling, swearing group jeered at the hostlers and applauded the mules; revolvers were barking, and a wiry, active man wearing two guns was repeatedly thrusting another man aside and reaching for the box.

This was Slade.

"No more words out of you," he ordered harshly.

"I'm the boss. I'm Jack Slade. That's my private team. I don't allow no man to drive that team when I'm around. 'Twouldn't be safe for them—or for him, either. Now——"

"But, Mister Slade, this is my run," argued the other man, who was the driver. "You wouldn't have me miss my run, would you? I'd lose my job if Ben Holladay——"

"Who's Ben Holladay? I'm a bigger man than Ben Holladay. Where is he? I'll clip his coat buttons at twenty yards. And I mean to drive this team. No measly coyote of a red-headed bull-whacker is going to keep a boss king whip off that box. You know my name, don't you?"

"But, Mister Slade——!"

Slade hurled the driver aside.

"All 'board! Where are those passengers?"

"You'd better get right in, ladies and gents," besought the station-keeper. "Don't mind what you see."

"Oh, I must," gasped the woman with the baby; and in she darted.

"That settles it for us too," firmly remarked Father Richards. "Everybody in; but I'll report this to the company."

"Haw! haw! Report Jack Slade?" laughed the drunken group.

"Who'll report Jack Slade?" blared Slade himself, pausing in his climb to the box.

"I will, sir," retorted Terry's father. "This whole affair is an outrage. You're an employee of the com-

pany—you ought to be ashamed of yourself, as a man and as a company official.”

Slade’s hand fell to a revolver butt, and he glared fiercely. Father Richards glared back.

“You can’t frighten me, sir. I’ve got these women to protect, and I’ve faced powder and ball too often to be cowed by any tipsy desperado.”

“Ralph!” Terry’s mother implored in alarm.

“You talk as if you were a fighting man,” sneered Slade. “Where’d you get that blue overcoat?”

“I earned it, sir. Where’s yours? Show your colors.”

“Ralph!” implored Terry’s mother. “You aren’t strong enough. Think of us.”

“I size you up,” spoke Slade. “All right; but I wouldn’t swallow much of that language; no, not from General Grant himself. If you’re going on with those women you’d better pile inside and save your breath. I’ll show you all some fancy driving.”

They all bundled in—that is, all but Terry. Suddenly, at the last moment, an idea struck him.

“I’ll stay outside,” he called, as he slammed the door on George’s heels; and without waiting for reply he ran around and sprang up to the box. Some sober man, who could drive, ought to be there, in case——!

He was just in time. The drunken crew also were swarming aboard—cheering and cursing and scrambling up the sides, for top and box. He won his place; but before he had settled, Slade, lines and whip in hands, shouted, “Let ’er go!” The hostlers dived free of the mules, and the frantic team plunged ahead.

"Bang! Bang! Bang-bang!" celebrated the gang behind him, sprawling over the baggage, and pulling trigger.

"Whoo-ooop!" yelled Driver Slade, plying lash and shaking the lines. "Hi yip! Yip! Yip!"

The crazed mules tore. The coach lurched and bounded. In the faint moonlight and lamplight the sage and brush reeled by.

"Bang! Bang-bang! Bang!"

"Whoo-oo-ooop! Yip! Lay out! Lay out! Ki-yi! Hi-yi!"

How long was this thing going to last, without a smash? If only nothing broke——! The next station was ten miles. Could those mules keep up the pace? Tossed and jerked, Terry hung with both hands. He pitied the people inside. They would be frightened almost to death—especially his mother and the woman with the baby. But his father and George were there.

Whether he could do any good out here, he did not know. Anyway, he was ready for action—was ready to seize the lines, if he had the chance, or to leap to grab the lead mules, in an overturn, or open the coach door, or lend quick hand wherever necessary.

Great Scott, what a ride!

On they whirled, with furious drum of hoofs, with rumble and groan of coach, and the delighted yelps and revolver shots of the drunken crew. The mules were mad with terror. Slade never for an instant relaxed his urging by lash and voice. Amidst the

uproar not a sound could be heard from the inside passengers.

Slade suddenly glanced at Terry. His eyes burned in his flushed face.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

"Terry Richards."

"Where you from?"

"Beaver Creek station."

"What do you do there?"

"Hostler."

"Where you going?"

"Dead-heading to Salt Lake."

"You are, are you?" Slade paid attention to the mules again, and returned to Terry. "Dead-heading! Not with Jack Slade! You work your passage. You either yell, shoot or drive. By thunder, you take these lines, or else off you go. I'll make a cub of you. I'll teach you to drive a six. Take these lines and let's see your spunk."

He thrust the bunch of lines, held in one hand, at Terry. Plainly enough, he thought that he was bullying Terry—"hazing" a young hostler and frightening him half to death; wanted to hear him plead, maybe.

But Terry seized the lines promptly. He had no great liking for the job of trying to drive these runaway mules; he was wise and made no protest, however—he fooled Jack Slade to that extent, and he resolved that he might fool him further. He'd a heap rather hold the lines himself than have Slade holding them, for Slade had merely let them hang loose.

Slade kept the upper hand, though. He had whip

and brake—and how could a fellow drive without the brake, especially when the other man was using the whip?

Out flew the lash—forward sprang the crazed mules; all Terry's hauling back was in vain. He was almost pulled from his seat; the stage swerved around a curve, scarcely seen before struck, and he was well-nigh hurled overboard.

"You capsize this coach and I'll have your scalp," bawled Slade. "Hooray!" he cheered. He fished out a revolver, and with shot and whip spurred the team to top speed. "Now drive, you! I'll make a king whip of you! Hooray! Fast time on the Overland! Slade knows how to put 'em through. You bet!"

The riot behind had died down. Either the men atop had exhausted their ammunition and themselves, or they were occupied in hanging fast. In spite of Terry's best efforts, the mules ran free; all he might do was to try to hold their heads up and steady their feet—perhaps guide them a little; whenever they slackened, Slade broke them to a run again.

"Ten to one that I nick the off leader's ear," he shouted. "Bang!" spoke his revolver, and the lead mules plunged as if stung.

By the yellow glare of the coach lamps the team's haunches were seen to be covered with sweat; flakes of lather spun backward. How long they would stand up under such punishment Terry could not know. He nerved himself, alert for any accident. Everything was up to him now: to keep the mules in their course, to save the coach from an upset (if he could), to

reach the next station with his father and mother, and George, and the woman and the baby, unharmed. So he drove the best he knew how, hauling and guiding and peering into the darkness, for the road before—and a little prayer welled in his heart.

The team were tiring. On the up-grades they slackened to a weary trot; Slade swore at them—on the down-grade and the level he forced them to a labored gallop.

After a long, long time a welcome light glimmered ahead. The station!

"We'd better stop at the station for a change, hadn't we, Mr. Slade?" queried Terry. "Our team's petered out. We can't make time."

And that was true. The mules were all in. Even Slade could not force them to more than a labored lope.

"Kill 'em! D'you call this 'driving'? Whoopee! Now send 'em in! Hooray!" He grabbed a coach lamp—flung it at the leaders, and it burst in the road like a shell. Instantly he grabbed the other, from the opposite side beyond Terry's braced legs, and flung it also. He yelled the stage-driver's yell. The mules veered aside into the brush—there was a moment of bucking and tilting while the coach hung on two wheels—Slade shouted gleefully and Terry, taken by surprise, hauled again desperately, and urged and soothed—the team straightened out, just in time, slanted into the road once more, and at the station Terry succeeded in pulling them down. With the coach

running up on the wheel pair's heels, they stopped willingly enough——

"What's this?" demanded Slade.

"Boner, Mr. Slade."

"Who told you to make a stop here?"

But Terry tossed the lines to the nearest hostler, vaguely seen in the dimness; another hostler was holding the spent but still nervous leaders by the bits; the station-keeper was out.

Slade was on the ground quicker than Terry himself, and had jerked open the coach door.

"Salt Lake!" he announced mockingly. "End of run. Everybody out."

The crew atop were clumsily swarming down, amidst laughter and jeers; and with a chorus of Indian-like whoops and a final spatter of revolver shots they all, following Slade, disappeared, pellmell. They seemed to imagine that they had played a great joke.

"Who was that? Slade?"

"Yes. Slade's gang!"

"By jiminy, they nigh killed these mules."

"He didn't have the ribbons, though. Who was handling the ribbons? Who straightened the team out, in the brush yonder, after the lamps busted?"

"Guess I was holding the lines," confessed Terry, to the queries.

"Where you from?"

"Beaver Creek, Denver Division."

"Where'd Slade get on? Where's the regular driver? Did you drive all the way from Laporte?"

"No, I didn't. Slade made me take the lines, a

piece back. But there wasn't much driving. He had whip and brake."

"Terry!" It was his mother's frantic voice. "Are you there? Are you safe?"

"I'm all right, ma. It's all over. They've gone."

"Yes; they won't be back," assured the station-keeper. "Anybody hurt? When Slade gets to sky-larking there's no telling what'll happen."

"Nobody hurt," answered Terry's father. "We're pretty badly shaken—but nothing serious."

"You can thank this boy that you didn't turn over, the last minute. What else you can thank him for I don't know, but I'd sure hate to ride on the box with Jack Slade when he's liquored up," replied the station-keeper. "He's liable to do anything."

"Did your hair stand stiff, Terry?" asked George. "Gee, but that was a ride!"

"I didn't think about my hair. I was thinking mostly about you folks."

The drooping team had been led to the stables; the fresh team was coming.

"How about driving on, now?" inquired the station-keeper. "I'm short-handed here. Wife's sick, an' one hostler's been kicked in the leg an' t'other one's new to stagin', so I can't take you on myself. You'll find a driver up at Cherokee; or you can wait for the down stage. There might be an extra aboard her."

"Oh, I'll drive," spoke Terry. "How far to Cherokee?"

"Only twelve miles. You'll get there for breakfast."

"But, Terry! Aren't you tired? Can you drive at night?" exclaimed his mother.

"Of course, Ma. That's no trick."

"He's just been a-drivin', ma'am, ain't he?" demanded the station-keeper. "From what I see, I'd as soon trust to him as to a green hostler—and many a stage has had to go on with a green hostler, in a pinch."

"I'd feel safer with him, myself," put in the woman with the baby.

"Are you up to it, Terry, boy?" asked his father. "If you are, go ahead. I'll sit on the box with you."

"No, sir! You stay with ma. George and I planned to ride outside anyway. I'd as soon drive as sit, and he can spell me if I get too sleepy."

"Those hosses'd trail to Cherokee of themselves," scoffed the station-keeper. "Yes, and turn out for the down-stage. Jest a jiffy now, till I stick in lamps. One's not much good, but I guess you can see."

"All 'board, folks." And Terry climbed to the box again. George settled beside him.

At the slam of the coach door and the call, "Right, here," the four horses strained, Terry let them go, and under him the coach, with its precious load, rolled forward on the last lap of the night run to Cherokee. He remained so wide awake, after the excitement of the trip from Boner, that George did not get a chance at the lines. Driving carefully but steadily, he passed the down-stage about an hour out; its twin lamps flared upon him for a moment, and were gone; presently George quit talking and snored; as like as not

the inside passengers were sleeping, too; so he was alone, with the coach, in the night.

It was fun, but it was hard work, also. He made Cherokee at dawn; and after breakfast he was glad enough to surrender the lines to a driver who was there, and snooze, wedged atop, most of the way to the dinner station of Virginia Dale.

CHAPTER XVIII

TRouble ON BRIDGER'S PASS

"WHEN do we cross the mountains, anyhow?" asked George for the third or fourth time.

At Virginia Dale station they had been transferred to another fourteen-passenger coach, and had left the smaller coach to be overhauled in the blacksmith shop. The Concord coaches were supposed to stand almost any amount of hard usage, but the rough trip when Slade was on the box had proved too much for this old veteran.

The driver out of Virginia Dale eyed the big coach dubiously.

"She's all right for me," he remarked. "The only question is, how the man on the Bridger Pass run will get her through the opening. She overhangs by six inches."

"What will he do then?" queried Terry's mother. "Is the pass so narrow as that?"

"It's as wide as it can be made, ma'am. Nature did it. Mebbe you'll all squeeze through, with a little scraping; or mebbe there'll be a coach at t'other end, waiting, and you can walk through. Emigrants are told to be ready to take their wagons apart, when

wider'n the law allows, and up-end 'em. So don't worry."

Bridger's Pass, by which the Rocky Mountains were crossed, was over 200 miles from Virginia Dale. The scenery grew wilder—real mountain scenery, with swift, cold trout streams, sage and pines, snow blotches near at hand on bare slopes, and elk and deer, rabbits, grouse, now and then a wolf, and once a huge bear sitting up like a dog to watch the stage.

The roomy coach had one advantage: it supplied everybody with an outside seat. The woman and her baby stayed inside, but Father and Mother Richards mounted atop, to the seat behind the box.

Now it was the afternoon of the second day out of Virginia Dale, and George, who seemed to have Bridger's Pass on the brain, was eagerly looking ahead for it.

"When do we cross the mountains, anyhow?" he demanded.

Driver Big Dick, who had taken the lines at the last home station, laughed.

"Oh, pshaw! What's troubling you? First thing you know we'll be across."

"But we have to go through the pass, don't we?" Terry's mother asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Through it or over it, just as you say. There 'tis."

Behind four horses, they were slowly climbing a long stretch of bare rolling country, covered only with low sage. They were high, for the air wafted chill,

as if from snow-banks—and, indeed, snow-banks curiously lay on either side.

No cliffs or sharp peaks appeared anywhere near; the rolling country extended before, and all around their route. It was magnificent—this great expanse; and the big coach felt very small to the passengers.

"But I don't see any pass," blurted George.

"And you aren't likely to," asserted Driver Dick. "There's a squall waiting yonder."

The rolling country gradually uprose into a smooth ridge, along which the stage road ahead appeared to wind. The road there merged into a cloud cap, swirling and hanging, with fringed edges.

"Snow, eh?" spoke Terry's father.

"Nothing else, up here. Snows or hails the year 'round."

"How high are we?"

"Only eight thousand feet—but see those hosses puff? The pass is over 9,000. It's a stiffer climb than you'd think. Fact is, gener'ly we have six hosses, when the Injuns leave us enough stock. Four hosses and a heavy coach like this aren't right. No, sir. You passengers don't weigh so awful much, but I got near a ton of mail besides."

The horses, not of the strongest, were having a rather tough time; Dick set the brake, to pause, and breathe them. The afternoon had rapidly waned to early dusk, for the sun had sunk behind the storm cloud. The cloud had spread, the breeze blew cold and raw.

"We'd better go inside, hadn't we?" proposed Terry's mother.

"Yes, I think we had. Coming, boys?"

"We'll stay. We want to see the pass."

"Put on your buffalo coats, then."

"They'll need 'em," grunted Driver Dick. "It's nine months winter, up here, and three months' late in the fall. I froze my fingers on the Fourth o' July."

Father and Mother Richards joined the woman with the baby, inside. Terry and George and Driver Dick donned their overcoats. The stage started on.

The breeze blew harder and harder, colder and colder. Up and up toiled the four horses, dragging the coach, and slowly topping the ridge. The road did not look steep; it was one of those long grinds, with no let-down—the worst kind.

The wind fairly howled. There was nothing to break its force. It made the coach stagger, and seemed wellnigh to blow the horses off their feet. The lines hummed. With watering eyes the boys squinted ahead. The whole ridge was veiled in white—and on a sudden the scurrying flakes struck them, full tilt.

In a moment the air was thick with a regular blizzard. The horses became white, the coach and everything on it whitened, the ground was white, the road was covered, the high country was curtained off.

"Shucks!" George complained. "How'll we see to get through the pass? We may stick fast."

Big Dick grimly drove.

"That joke's too old for such weather. Jim Bridger invented it ten years ago. Whether we'll stick I

dunno—but you're on the pass now. All this open ridge is the pass. Most tenderfeet are led to expect a gorge just wide enough for a wagon; but you could drive all the coaches on the line across it, abreast. It's nothing but a smooth dip—a sort of saddle in the backbone of this here continent."

"Aw——!" stammered George, only half believing.

"Injuns or no Injuns, storm or shine, never again will I make this drive with a double-decker coach and only four hosses," grumbled Big Dick. "Not for no reason what-some-ever. Ben Holladay can kill his stock himself. I'll not do it."

And, buffeted by the fierce storm, it did indeed seem nip and tuck for coach and horses. Presently Dick heaved a sigh of relief.

"Over the wust, I reckon, and on the level."

"How do you know?" For dusk had settled down and the snow was still blinding.

"I can tell by the feel. We're running easier. The station's not far ahead now. Pretty soon we'll be across, where the streams flow west. Like as not we'll get into better weather too." And—"We're getting into it already," he added, in a minute. "We're through it. I often find the sky clear up here, while there's a storm below."

The storm was thinning. They had been a long time climbing the pass, for the day was gone, as if swept away by the wind. Stars began to twinkle overhead, and the wind died to a flicker.

Big Dick abruptly pointed before with his whip.

"By the jumping jiminy!" he exclaimed, not loud,

but tense. "The station's been fired. That means Injuns. Now what to do!"

Half a mile before there was an unsteady spot of yellowish red gleaming low amidst the white expanse.

Terry felt his heart skip a beat, and heard George catch breath. They all sat for a moment silent and staring, while Dick checked the hopeful team to a slow walk.

"Must have jumped it during the storm. Hasn't been snowing so hard up here, though," murmured Dick. "Huh! Sioux, o' course, lifting hair and stock. Now what to do? Hosses tuckered, two boys, two men, two women and baby—I certainly'd hate to beat back through that storm below again, and miss the road. Nope; our best holt is to keep a-going. Station's probably been burning an hour or so, and that means the redskins have skedaddled with their plunder. If they sight us we'll make a run for it to Sulphur, and fight 'em off on the way. There's light enough for shooting. Let's stop a minute."

He halted the team and stiffly swung off.

"Say, Mister, step out, if you please," he called, at the coach door. "Want to show you something."

The door of the closely curtained coach opened, and Terry's father issued. Big Dick drew him aside a few paces.

"See yonder?"

Father Richards looked.

"Aha! What's that? The station?" He acted cool; he was a soldier.

"Where the station used to be."

"What are you going to do?"

"Going to drive on. Pine Grove is nine miles behind, in the storm; Sulphur Springs is ten miles ahead, in the clear. You've got a rifle and one boy has a pistol. I've got a rifle and six-shooter. There are three of us to use 'em, and me to do the driving, and two women to protect. It'll be mostly down hill. Two of you stretch out among the baggage atop, leave me one boy on the box, and we'll lick all the red varmints in creation. But we may not see a single pelt. 'Tisn't Injun weather, this time o' night."

"You're the captain," agreed Terry's father.

"What's the trouble, Ralph?" asked Terry's mother, as he reached inside the coach for his rifle.

"Nothing serious." There was little to be gained by alarming her or the other woman. "But we're at a place where the Indians have been raiding; so I think I'll ride on top with the boys."

"Which of you fellows is the best shot with a Colt's?" demanded Driver Dick, of the two on the box.

"I don't know," Terry answered. "I'm pretty good. Wild Bill Hickok taught me. George can beat me with a rifle."

"You stay on the box with me then. Can you shoot with either hand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You take both guns, then. The two with the rifles will work fine on top, behind. All 'board. Every minute counts."

Everybody quickly settled. Terry's father and George squatted amidst the baggage, on the top, fac-

ing right and left, the rifles ready. With six-shooter in either hand, Terry braced himself on the box. Driver Dick grasped whip and lines, chirped at the shivering horses, and the coach creaked forward.

"Just keep your eyes peeled for anything moving ahead," bade Dick to Terry. "You fellows behind watch the sides and rear. I'll tend to the hosses. Don't scare. Injuns are mighty leery of loaded guns, but they're lightning when they think you're scared."

He drove on. Six feet three inches, and built accordingly, was "Big Dick," and a king whip who didn't know fear except for others. He had staged through the mountains for years.

The moon had not risen, but the star-shine on the snow was bright. They drew nearer to the ruined stage station of Bridger's Pass. The fire had died down considerably, and was licking among the coals and charred logs. Not a sign of life appeared. Dick relaxed a little.

"Nothing there," he said. "Let's stop a minute and scout about."

He braked the horses; they pricked their ears uneasily, as if wondering what was the matter. He passed the lines to Terry and boldly swung down. He could be seen, black against the snow and the flames, stamping around, exploring the premises; he made a circuit, examined the ground, and trudged back to the coach.

Terry was glad to have him return. There was something awesome in this place—the mysteriously burning station, the silence, and the lonesomeness—

the token of tragedy away up here on the crest of the Continental Divide.

"Nothing dead but a brindled dog," reported Dick, climbing aboard. "He had some arrows in him; then the varmints stuck a pitchfork through him and pinned him so his head burned off. I remember that dog well. The station-keeper thought a heap of him. An awful good dog, poor old Towser! I have a notion he gave the alarm and the station hands broke away; don't see any trace of 'em in the fire. The Injun tracks lead off west'rd, as if they might be going down to Sulphur themselves. All we can do is to follow."

The horses hated to move on. They knew that this was their station, and that they had earned food and rest. But Dick launched his lash above them, ordered briskly, and they sluggishly toiled ahead, across the wide open country lying abandoned to the starlight.

There were still some short grades—sort of billows; the team groaned as they tugged the coach; the snow had crusted, but was getting mushy underneath. Dick tried to quicken pace at the top of each grade, so as to gain a view before in short time.

"Fresh pony tracks, gentlemen," he informed. "See them, in the road?" He stopped and sprang down again to examine. "Old enough to have frozen, though," he announced, as he took his seat. "The Injuns may have kept on to Sulphur. If they fail at Sulphur, they may scout back along the road, to lay for this stage; or they may hit the road t'other side of Sulphur, for the up-stage; or they may be getting out

of the country. If they lay for this stage, they'll likely be in a canyon ahead; so be ready with your guns, for I'm going through that canyon as fast as the whip will send us."

The coach was descending from the great pass. The first glow of the rising moon was visible, above the hills, as the road wound among the long slopes. Dick settled himself more securely, pulled down his hat, shook out his whip, and slightly tautened the lines.

"Hang tight with your feet and pump the lead, and don't mind the yelling," he said. "Nothing'll stop us while the hosses hold out."

His lash shot forward and cracked like a pistol.

"Git, you!" he barked. "Git!"

The horses, their ears sullenly flat, quickened from trot into dogged lope, Dick gently braked through a narrowing, curving swale; suddenly he released the brake, cracked his lash, yelped vigorously, and, rounding a shoulder of the hillside, the coach entered a downward-leading canyon, rocky underfoot, bouldered on the steep flanks, and as crooked as a ram's horn.

The coach jounced and bounded as the wheels struck ruts and stones. Now and then it slewed dangerously, for there had been sleet here. A horse stumbled, almost fell, but recovered. The turns were very sharp, between the canyon walls and a deeply cut gulch at the bottom of which a stream dashed madly. The horses' ears were erect, as they tried to keep their footing; the coach thundered at their heels, and Dick drove freely, sawing with the lines, touching up with the lash, steadying with the brake, but not slackening.

Would the canyon never end? The moon was in the sky, the coach made a tremendous noise—and this was nervous work, to sit rocked and pitched but all eyes and ears, while the coach twisted and turned through shine and shadow, and every curve might open into an ambush.

“Almost through,” rapped Dick. “They’ll be at other end now, if anywhere.”

The pace increased. The horses slipped repeatedly on the icy turns. But glimpses were to be had of open country before. The lower end of the canyon must be near. Dick was about to rush it—on they boomed and rattled. Terry held his breath, ready, his two Colts cocked and poised—they rounded what was the last turn, the canyon widened to gentler slopes. Dick had uttered half a jubilant cheer, when with a “Whoof!” a bulky shape sprang across the trail, at the smell and sight of bear the team whirled on a pivot, the coach spun, struck a boulder, and was over in a flash.

Terry had fleeting vision of the horses rearing and plunging in a heap, as they lost their footing on the ice under the snow, and he flew through the air, discharging both revolvers when he landed, shoulders first.

CHAPTER XIX

ALONE ON THE DANGER TRAIL

HE picked himself up while everything was still whirling around. His eyes cleared, he got his bearings. He had landed below the coach, which was lying on its side upon the snowy slope between him and the road. Big Dick had hung to the lines, and was already wrestling with the horses, mixed together and plunging. The top load, passengers and baggage, had been thrown wide. His father was staggering erect, George was sitting crooked, as if dazed. From inside the coach the baby was crying.

Terry ran to the rescue. He and his father arrived together. The first thing they did was to jerk open the coach door on the upper side.

"Anybody hurt? Answer, quick!"

"I hope not. I—don't—think—so. No, I'm not." That was his mother's voice replying, confused. "Are you, Mrs. Davis? Or the baby?"

"We're all right."

"Can you get out alone? Do you need help?" Terry's father queried. "Take my hand."

From the jumbled interior Mother Richards appeared, and was lifted out. The other woman held

up the baby; she followed. They were bruised and shaken, but had had a marvelous escape from any serious hurt.

"Are you safe, Terry? Where's George?"

"I'm here," announced George.

"What's the matter?"

"Feels like my leg's busted. I can't get up."

"Oh, the dickens!" deplored Terry. He and his father went to George. "Pain much?"

"Does when I move it any. Ouch!"

"Let's see."

"Right there!" gasped George. He turned a little white. He had lost his hat. The perspiration stood out on his brow.

"Between knee and ankle, eh?" mused Terry's father. "Not a bad break. The question is, how to move *you*. Here's a broken leg, driver," he called.

"And one hoss with a broken neck here, and the harness I dunno what, yet," panted Big Dick. "Wait till I cut this dead hoss free. Whoa, now! Whoa, boys!" He worked rapidly. Terry hastened to assist. They straightened out the team, which presently stood more quietly. "All right-o," Big Dick pronounced. "That'll do. Fetch a buffalo robe. We'll have to change that lad to safer quarters, alongside the coach."

George uttered not a sound, but he fainted before they finally laid him on the buffalo robe and under a blanket, close beside the overturned coach. Big Dick was all business.

"Now one of us has got to straddle a hoss and go down to Sulphur for help. There's one hoss that can

be ridden; 'tothers never have been backed; and, anyhow, the women can be protected better right here, with the coach for cover, than strung out along the road; if the Injuns corral us we can fight 'em off from the coach, but loose on the road is a different proposition. I stay here. I know Injuns, and have been in fracas before. Mister Soldier Man has smelled powder, and his place is here too. I reckon the boy with the busted leg can handle a gun. So it's up to this other boy. He can get through as well as anybody, and he'll do it."

"Oh, Terry!" Mother Richards gasped.

"Yes, ma'am," responded Big Dick. "I know how you feel. But we can't right the coach, we needn't sit all night waiting for something to happen, and that courier job has got to be performed by somebody. He can ride and he can shoot and he's heap man for his size. Sulphur's only five miles, through open country; he can see Injuns as quick as they see him; and if he can't get through he can come back. That stage hoss is fast—will run like a scared cat when Injuns are after him."

"Well, Terry," spoke Father Richards. "Will you go?"

"Sure thing, Dad." And Terry tried to still his beating heart. "Ready now. Where's the horse, Dick? Which one?"

"I hate to have you, Terry," his mother faltered.

"He's a man. It's part of a man's work," firmly spoke his father. "And we can depend on him, too," he added.



Spoken by William B. Dyer

HE FLEW THROUGH THE AIR, DISCHARGING BOTH REVOLVERS WHEN HE LANDED, SHOULDERS FIRST.

"You bet your life," agreed Big Dick. "Come along," he bade, to Terry. "Keep one of those Colts, and ammunition for it. I'll put you aboard the hoss. It's that blaze-face roan. He's the best hoss of the bunch. Wait till I cut down this harness."

"Wish I could go," uttered George, who had waked up and heard. "If it wasn't for my busted leg—— Ouch! You take my pistol, if you want to. She's a humdinger when she doesn't miss fire."

"You keep it. May have to use it yourself, and she knows you," Dick answered. "This here navy o' mine will fix him out." He led Terry, astride the bareback horse, into the road.

"You can't lose yourself, if you watch the ruts where the snow's thin. Keep your eye on these Injun pony tracks, too; as long as they're ahead of you you're all right. If they branch off you'll have to be a bit more keerful. You'll see the lights of Sulphur in about two miles. Then if everything there looks O. K. and peaceful it's pretty good sign the Injuns have gone 'round. There's a bluff in rear of station; the Injuns'll be on it, if anywhere. If the ground looks clear and no sign of a siege, then when you're in pistol sound give three shots as signal. The station men'll answer, and if they signal you in, you go straight and go fast. They'll be expecting the stage. Ask 'em to send men and animals enough to get us out o' here. But if you can't make the station, turn 'round and back-track pronto, and we'll manage some other way."

"Don't take unnecessary risks, Terry," begged his mother.

"No'm. I'm not afraid, Ma. I'll out-run the Injuns. This horse can beat theirs and this gun can beat their bows and arrows. Good-bye, folks. See you later. G'wan, Blazer!"

He forced Blazer into an unwilling trot, and away he went, revolver in his right hand, check-rein in his left, and Blazer's backbone trying to split him apart.

The waning moon shone, the snow was not deep but very white, and the country lay well exposed, and as dead as in winter. There was not a trace of any movement, except those pony tracks. But the pony tracks were enough to keep him alert.

He trotted on and on, getting farther and farther from his base, the party at the coach, and farther and farther into the lonely distance where danger lurked. Over and over again he figured upon what he would do if the Indians jumped him; but much depended upon how they jumped him—and, of course, that was one thing hard to figure. He must hold himself ready to act in a jiffy—to dash forward, or to dash back—but he'd a heap rather dash forward, and lead the Indians away from the coach—only, if Sulphur had been destroyed, where would he land? Whew!

The pony tracks continued. He grew tenser and tenser, watching them, and the country ahead and on either side. It seemed to be a mighty long five miles. The road wound among gentle rises; from the openings he peered eagerly for the lights of the station.

At last, there they were, or one, that is—a twinkle

amidst the wide expanse. But even while he gazed the twinkle quit—went out. What did that mean? Indians? Lights were always extinguished when Indians were about. The tracks led on.

Listening for shot and shout, and nervously leaning forward, with a great wish that he was somewhere else, but afraid only that he might make a mistake, he kept going.

Of a sudden he missed the pony tracks. They had turned off. Now he had no guide at all—yes, he had, for he could see the station, like a black spot, three quarters of a mile ahead.

Where were the Indians? He was at sea as to that. They might be at the station—they might be out of sight, closing in on it and on him—the country dipped, and there were bluffs, where they could hide; or they might be waiting to cut him off.

Terry swallowed his beating heart, took the bit in his teeth, so to speak, gripped his gun tighter, settled upon Blazer, and rode right forward. He was going to find out something, and that very soon. But it was a long way back to the coach folks.

The silence seemed heavy and warning. He hated to fire the three shots. However, he ought to obey orders, and Big Dick knew what was the best thing to do. The station loomed larger and darker and more mysterious. Hah! Here were other hoof-prints, entering the road, from one side. The dirt had been dug up and thrown, as if the horses had been at full speed.

That looked bad—it looked like a chase. He caught

himself shivering with excitement and caution. He was of two minds: one, to break wildly forward and finish the business; the other, to hold Blazer in and gaze. That was the question—whether to meet any danger or to let the danger come to him.

The folks at the coach were depending on Terry Richards, and Terry Richards resolved that he'd do his best. He slackened, just a trifle, and fired three shots—Bang! Bang! And bang!

How Blazer jumped, and how the shots echoed, alarming the whole country! Now the Indians would know, if they had not known before. He halted and reloaded, while listening hard, and staring right, left, behind, every which-way. Yes, he was plumb scared, and trembling all through.

He waited, breathing fast, figuring upon what to do next; for the station did not answer. It lay silent. The bluff behind it was silent. He could not make out movements, anywhere; and he could not make out whether the station had been abandoned.

Should he risk riding on? Or should he quit and ride back to the coach, bearing the word that he had found nobody? No, he could not do that. And he ought not to waste time sitting here. If the station was deserted, and no Indians headed him off, he must ride on to the next station, and keep going. That was the motto of the Overland Stage Line—"Keep Going."

Terry drew long breath, tightened rein, pressed his heels into Blazer's ribs, and rode on, as boldly as though he had a regiment behind him. This was a

brave act. To face the unknown danger is a real test of nerve.

He had advanced about half way, without slackening (if Indians were watching, they would not quite know what he was up to, coming on so confidently), when, hurrah! A light gleamed in the station; the door opened, and, as he dashed down at full speed, several figures stood out to receive him.

He had done it—he was safe!

“Hello!”

“Hello, yourself!”

“Didn’t you hear me shoot?”

“Kinder thought we did; so we thought we’d take a look. What’s wrong?”

“Big Dick sent me. Bridger’s Pass station has been burned by the Injuns, and our coach turned over at this end of the canyon, five miles out. Dick wants help.”

“All right. You bet! The Pass hands are here. Injuns chased ’em nigh to the door, but didn’t stay. We’ll go up for Dick. Who’s with him? Did you start out alone?”

“Had to. He couldn’t spare anybody else. There are two women and a baby, and only two men and another boy with his leg broken.”

“You shore did well. That’s a lonesome road,” remarked one of the men. “Better get off while we’re rustlin’ hosses and tackle.”

Terry dismounted. He was rather weak in the knees, now that the strain was over.

CHAPTER XX

ABOARD THE HOLLADAY SPECIAL

THE coach and party were brought in, and stayed until morning. George's leg was put in splints—a process which turned him very white again and left him very limp, but more comfortable. What seemed to hurt him worse was the thought that he had broken the Salt Lake trip as well as the leg. He had to lie by now at Sulphur, and as for Terry——

"You go ahead," he urged. "There's no use in your waiting on *me*. You go ahead with your folks. You can pick me up on your way back."

"Not on your life, boy!" laughed Terry. "The folks are going right on through to California. 'Twouldn't be any fun for me, by myself, in Salt Lake. I'd as soon stay here in the mountains. There's plenty hunting, the station-keeper says. 'Twon't take you long to get ready to travel, and we'll stop off at Denver on our way back to Harry. I'm sort of anxious to see Beaver Creek again."

"Haven't been away long," George grunted.

"Seems like an age, just the same. Who'd have thought when we set out to walk to Kelly's that we'd land on the other side of the mountains!"

Sulphur Springs station, west of Bridger's Pass, was 323 miles short of Salt Lake City, but 300 miles from Beaver Creek. It was a "home" station—served supper to the west-bound coaches and breakfast to the east-bound; and the station-keeper's wife cooked the meals. She was on a visit in Salt Lake, though.

Sulphur Springs' scenery rather beat the scenery around Beaver Creek, but it didn't have the "outfit," Terry and George decided. The stable was lower and smaller—had just height enough for a horse to stand in under the heavy dirt roof. The station-house, of logs and dirt roof, was stout and low, to protect against Indians and storm, but it had only kitchen-dining-room, with one end screened off for a rude bed.

A pretty rough place for a woman, this. The hostlers, of course, slept in the stable. That was the custom at the swing stations, and at the home stations where the station-keeper had his wife with him. The stable shack did for stock and hands both.

Sulphur Springs station took its name from the springs themselves. There were two, side by side, only a few steps in the rear of the building. One was fine—cold and clear and didn't taste extra bad; but when Terry tried a sip of the other it gagged him.

"Exactly like a rotten egg," he warned to George.

"Smells the same, too," George grumbled. "I'd rather have that old well at Beaver, with some alkali and a rusty bucket as flavoring."

For some nights and days, while his bone was knitting and he had to lie still, George was a trifle cross and more than trifle uncomfortable. There was good

hunting, for elk and mountain sheep, especially up toward the pass, and for bear lower down; and Terry went out several times with one of the men, after meat.

Sulphur Springs lived mainly upon game, aside from the flour and other staple supplies brought in by the freighters, and now and then traded in by emigrants.

When once it had fairly started, George's leg, aided by the pure air and the hearty grub, healed rapidly. He began to hobble about, with support of a rude crutch; finally rode by stage west to Waskie, the next swing station, to see more of the country. And soon he proposed that they "light out."

"Those stages going east make me homesick," he blurted. "We've been out plenty long enough. I sure want to see Beaver Creek and the plains, and get the news."

"You can't travel before you're able," cautioned Terry—who had been dreaming of Beaver Creek himself. "Harry writes us not to be in a hurry; and the company's taking care of us. Ben Holladay said for us to stay until your leg was right strong."

The great stage king had passed through, in his usual hurry, on an extra trip to the other end, and had seemed to know all about them. Nothing escaped Ben Holladay.

"Well, it's strong. Didn't I ride down to Waskie, and pan out O. K.? Let's hop a stage as soon as there's room."

"All right. Next time Big Dick comes through we'll speak for the return trip."

But getting away from Sulphur was no easy matter. The stages had a crowded period. They rolled in from the west, full inside and overflowing outside; and two fellows dead-heading had to wait on the pay traffic. Even the friendly Big Dick did not dare to break the rules, and no passengers conveniently decided to stop off at Sulphur—to drink the water, or to hunt, or to admire the scenery!

"I tell you what," said Dick, taking pity on the exiles. "Next time you see me heading in the right direction, you jump me whether or no. I won't have time to put you off—I may make a holler, but if you can stick, you stick. I'll try to fix the baggage atop so that there'll be a hole for your legs."

He rumbled away without them.

"Either we stick, or we hoof it," declared George. And they went fishing.

It was no trick at all to catch a mess of trout. That was lucky, or they would have missed out, for they got back to the station, toward noon, just in time. They had not been there more than five minutes, when up the road from Waskie direction there came another stage.

The station-keeper sighted it first.

"Holladay's a-comin'!" he yelled. "Hey, you stable men! Dust the seat of yore pants—Holladay's a-comin'. Get yore best team ready. Gosh!" he added, "I didn't expect him this soon, but here he is.

Wish they'd give us a telegraph operator, so's we'd know something."

The telegraph line had been put through, by way of the old main stage route across the mountains, but its stations were few and far between, as yet.

"That man almost beats the telegraph," answered the station-keeper's wife, who had hastened to the door to gaze. She was home from Salt Lake, and doing the cooking again.

"Well, rustle what grub we've got, and set out yore chiny dishes just imported from Paree," her husband bade, sarcastic. "Ben'll likely stay three minutes for a snack."

This was welcome excitement. Everybody hustled. George limped, to help with dinner; Terry ran to the stable, to lend a hand there; the station-keeper slicked his hair and combed his whiskers by aid of the cracked fragment of looking-glass hanging against the cabin rear wall, above the tin wash-basin.

No whoop from the driver was needed to announce the arrival of Ben Holladay. Fast though he traveled, news of him was apt, somehow, to travel faster. When the coach, behind its sweaty team, pulled short before the station, Sulphur Springs was ready to receive it.

The stage king himself was on the box with the driver. The genial face of Mr. Otis and the black countenance of the darky servant peered from the windows. The driver tossed aside his lines as the stable hands sprang to the traces.

"How are you, gentlemen?" greeted the station-keeper. "Dinner?"

Stage King Holladay snapped his watch.

"No," he said as he swung down. "Fetch on your team. We'll take a cup of coffee, if you have it ready, while we stretch our legs. Come out, George. You too, Eph."

"Coffee in one shake," promised the station-keeper. "Drink it standin' or settin'?"

"Just put the pot and cups where we can get them. My regards to your wife. We'll take a meal with her next time."

The stage king strolled a moment impatiently, his hands in his pockets, while he circuited the stage, scanned it, and the tired team, and the fresh team that was brought out on the trot. His eyes fell upon Terry and George.

"What are you doing here still?"

"Waiting to get away, Mr. Holladay," respectfully answered Terry.

"That leg well?"

"Yes, sir," informed George. "Well and kicking."

"What's the trouble then? You have passes."

"Yes, sir. But the east-bound stages are all full up."

"So you're going east again! Where to?"

"Back to Beaver Creek, where we belong, Mr. Holladay."

"What for?"

"Don't we get our jobs again, Mr. Holladay?" inquired Terry, in alarm. "We want to work. George's leg is plenty strong, and if we don't catch a stage pretty soon we'll hoof it."

"Here's your stage, then. Pile in. I'll give you five minutes." And at the call "Coffee!" the great Ben Holladay strode busily into the station house. Mr. Otis and the grinning Eph followed closely.

"Hooray!" cheered George, capering. "Reckon we can drink a cup ourselves and board that coach in less than five minutes. Haven't any trunk to pack!"

"Harry'll be surprised when we land there flying!" Terry laughed.

While swallowing the scalding coffee they managed to thank Mr. Holladay—at which he only grunted, with a short: "You ride inside with Otis and Eph, then." They were out ahead of time, waiting.

The team were standing, held by the hostlers. The driver emerged from the station, drew on his gloves, and climbed up. Mr. Otis entered. "You young gem'men next," directed Eph—the boys dived in. Eph entered and closed the door, Mr. Holladay hustled out, with a few last words, over his shoulder, to the station-keeper; and as he reached the box the brake clanged and the whip cracked and the team leaped.

Away rolled the coach; the horses seemed to know—they broke to a gallop, and the coach rumbled and rocked, while the brush spun by.

"Three hundred and ten miles to Beaver. Wonder when we'll get there," proposed Terry.

"About this time day after to-morrow," asserted Mr. Otis. "Ben's in a hurry. We've been averaging close to 150 miles every twenty-four hours, all the way from the western end. That includes stops, of course."

"Yes, suh," chuckled Eph. "Marse Ben shore in a big rush, 'cause he got importonant bus'ness in New Yawk. We done went sort o' go-as-you-please to Califohny; took thirteen days. Ain't that so, Mistah Otis? But we gwine to beat it back. I hear him kinder figgerin' on twelve days."

"Gee whizz!" gasped George. "Why, the regular schedule's seventeen and eighteen."

"Yes, suh," chuckled Eph. "An' mebbe we stop at Denver, too."

"The division agents are trying to keep ahead, to post the stations," said Mr. Otis, "but they're having hard work where there's no telegraph."

"No division agent notified Sulphur yet," replied George. "Guess he didn't have time. First we knew you were coming; and next we knew you were going."

Mr. Otis and Eph sat in the seat facing forward. Terry and George occupied the seat facing rearward. In their old clothes they felt a little awkward, traveling by this special coach, fitted with conveniences, stocked with the best of robes and extra garments, and carrying Ben Holladay, not to speak of General Superintendent Otis and black Eph. But Superintendent Otis made them at ease.

Mr. Holladay was always "Ben," to the employees—except when they spoke to him. Superintendent Otis was usually "Mister" Otis, whether he was present or not. Only Mr. Holladay called him George.

However, he proved to be a jolly man, very fond of inventing puns.

The driver put the team right through: breathed

them on the long grades up the pass, but kept them at trot or gallop down hill and on the level. At Bridger's Pass station, which had been rebuilt, Mr. Otis glanced at his watch.

"Ten miles, sixty-two minutes. Good enough, considering the team and the road," he remarked.

Somehow, the Pass station was prepared. Teams were changed without anybody getting out or off; and across the pass and down the winding descent by way of the bare ridge pitched and lumbered the coach.

While the sun sank lower, station after station was reached and left behind.

"Supper at North Platte, I fancy," mused Mr. Otis. "We need ballast. We're traveling too light—all but Eph."

"Yes, suh. But I'm powerful hongry, myself," objected Eph. "I got to eat, same as white folks."

"That may be," Mr. Otis retorted. "But you aren't traveling light. You're the wrong color, for that."

"Hi yah!" chuckled Eph. "That's right, Mistuh Otis."

They arrived at North Platte station shortly after sunset. Forty-three miles in scarcely eight hours, over the mountain roads.

"That's nothing to what it will be when we strike the plains," Mr. Otis volunteered. "Ben has no mercy on the animals. He always ruins several thousand dollars' worth, besides about wrecking the coach and upsetting traffic all along the line. But his motto is 'Get there.' "

After supper Mr. Holladay prepared to enter the

coach for the night. The coach carried a mattress roll, that by a clever arrangement might be spread out on the bottom.

"Mr. Otis and I go to bed on our trips," he said. "We can make room for the boy with the broken leg, between us. Eph usually puts his feet there, but he can sleep atop. That leaves the other boy to the box."

"I can sleep on the box just as well as any place, Mr. Holladay," Terry assured. "I've slept there before."

"I'd as soon sleep there, or on top, either," spoke George.

"No. You'll have to favor that leg if you expect to work when we land you at Beaver Creek." Mr. Holladay's voice was decisive. When he proposed a thing it was the same as an order. "If the other boy can sleep without falling off, all right. If not, he'd better stay awake, for we can't stop to pick him up."

"Aw, you won't lose Terry," scoffed George. "He's a regular king whip. He——"

"Shucks!" Terry cut in to put the brake on what might sound like a brag. "I've only played at being cub once in a while. But I know enough to hang on while I sleep."

All night they rolled on, down among the mountains. They took breakfast at Medicine Bow, sixty miles, rode all day across the Laramie Plains, had supper at Virginia Dale, passed through Laporte in the night; and when in the morning Terry awakened on the box they were bowling up the South Platte

Valley, on the branch line between Latham and Denver.

He changed places again with Mr. Holladay, and found George jubilant.

"Going to Denver! Now I'll see my folks."

"You will if we have the time."

"Wish I could telegraph ahead—but there isn't any telegraph."

And there wasn't, yet.

The road was fine—part of it as smooth and hard as a boulevard. The mule team, a snappy four. The driver set a rattling gait to the breakfast station—the last meal before dinner in Denver. And, sure enough, they halted at the Overland office in Denver shortly after one o'clock: 310 miles in about fifty hours.

"Do we stay here a little while, Mr. Holladay?"

"Why?"

"I'd like to say 'Howdy!' to my folks," explained George. "They don't know I'm coming."

"Well, they didn't have much chance." And the stage king again looked at his watch. "Half an hour," he said. "I've business that will keep me that long. Yes, I'll give you half an hour; but no more."

"We'll be on time."

A good-sized crowd was gazing respectfully at the great Ben Holladay; some of the on-lookers leveled a few jokes at the two boys, who in their rags hustled so importantly out of this special coach. But all this made no difference to George and Terry. They had their own fish to fry, and no minutes to waste in

answering questions. They were Overland men.

"Wish we could get a hair cut," George panted, as they hurried. "Hope the folks'll have a snack left over from dinner. Wonder if my dad's here."

CHAPTER XXI

FAST TIME TO HARRY

"I WANT to go. Can't I go to Beaver Creek?" Virgie was begging.

"You can come down on the regular stage some time. We're traveling special. It's Ben Holladay's coach," answered George.

"You can see us off anyway," added Terry. "Good-bye, Mrs. Stanton. Hurry on, George."

George's father was out with the First Colorado cavalry, helping to guard the plains; but they had found Mrs. Stanton and Virgie putting away the dinner dishes, and had spent a busy half-hour eating and swapping questions. Now time was up. Ben Holladay would be waiting.

Taking Virgie, they hurried back to the stage office. The coach and team of six mules were standing ready. The crowd was larger, for the arrival and departure of the great stage king was an event. All eyes were upon him as he stepped out of the office. He had washed and brushed, and was spick and span, with his expensive drab hat tilted and one of his fat cigars slanted perkily between his lips.

Mr. Bob Spotswood, who was division agent again

on the Denver-Julesburg run, followed him. "Long Slim" was on the box as driver; Mr. Otis and Eph were inside, with the door open.

"Good-bye, Virgie. You stand here and watch us. You can come to visit us at Beaver."

"I'm coming."

They left her so as to pile in; but Mr. Holladay seemed in no great haste. Accompanied by Agent Spotswood he half circuited the team, eyeing them.

"They look like good mules, Robert."

"Yes, Mr. Holladay. That's the Benham team. They rate as about the best trotters on the road."

"Gee! That's the Benham team!" exclaimed George. "You know the Benham team."

"I sure do," admitted Terry.

"All right," said Ben Holladay suddenly. "Let's fly, Robert. I'll give you an hour and a half to make the out station."

"We'll beat that time, Mr. Holladay."

The stage king swung to the box. Agent Spotswood climbed after, to sit on the top with his legs hanging over the back of the box, between the driver and Mr. Holladay. And the boys piled inside.

As the coach door slammed the mules started, to a cheer from the crowd. Terry had just time to wave his hand out of the window, at Virgie, ere she disappeared behind.

"Now we'll see some fast work," spoke Mr. Otis, in satisfied tone. "Roads are in good shape, no mountain grades, and Spotswood says his division is on its toes."

"Yes, suh. That team o' little mewls kin trabble a coach a mile ev'ry foh minutes, I heah tell," put in Eph.

"A mile every four minutes." Terry did some rapid calculating. "Beaver's 120 miles—that's 480 minutes; and that's eight hours. We'll get to Harry in the night. Have to wake him up."

"Maybe Mr. Holladay won't want to stop. We'll take a running jump, and land at the door!" planned George.

Mr. Otis laughed.

"You'll find the station awake. Nobody sleeps much along the line when Ben's due."

The coach was out of Denver and rumbling smoothly on its sixty-mile run to Latham. The harness jingled, jingled, like a shaken tambourine, and the twenty-four hoofs of the six mules clacked, clacked, all together, like a tambourine thumped.

The Benham team were the pride of the Denver division on the Overland. They certainly made good to-day. They never slackened to a walk, they never broke to a lope; but they trotted, trotted, at top pace, mile after mile, and only occasionally did "Long Slim" speak to them or crack his whip.

Mr. Otis smiled.

"Ben will enjoy this. He's a great lover of fine animals, whether horses or mules."

The swing station, fourteen miles out, was reached in exactly an hour and a quarter—seventy-five minutes; and at a trot the entire distance, the Benham

mules had averaged a mile in a little more than five minutes.

"Change to hosses here. Four grays," announced George, who was on the stable side.

The changing of teams was done in two minutes. Nobody had time to get off or get out.

"That's the 'catfish' team, gents," yelled the station-keeper, as the coach leaped forward. "Good for fifteen miles in an hour."

A glimpse was given of the lathered Benham team, being led to the stable—and the coach rolled on, behind the fast-stepping "catfish" grays.

Fort Lupton, the next station, fifteen miles, was reached in two minutes over the hour; a short stretch of sand had pulled down the pace. But, even at that——!

"Bet we'll pass the regular stage before we get to Latham," proposed George.

"No. She has too much of a head start. But we'll pass one beyond Latham, all right."

It was seventeen miles to Big Bend, and fifteen to Latham—the end of the sixty-mile run. Time, five hours; average, twelve miles an hour!

"Half an hour here for supper, I suppose," remarked Mr. Otis.

Mr. Holladay and Bob Spotswood were off the box; so was "Long Slim," and tucking away in his vest pocket two of the Holladay cigars. The two officials were scrutinizing coach and team, as the inside passengers tumbled out.

"Excellent work, Robert," said the stage king. "But how many horses and mules do you think I'll kill before I get across the plains?"

"Whew! Talk about flying!" George jubilated. "I reckon this trip's going to stand for a record."

"Oh, pshaw!" laughed Mr. Otis. "In a few years more people will think it pretty slow. They'll be traveling across the plains and mountains at thirty miles an hour, and go from the Missouri River to San Francisco in the same time it takes them now to go to Denver."

"Will there be a railroad, sure, Mr. Otis?"

"Absolutely. The California end has already been started eastward; that's the Central Pacific. And the Missouri River end, called the Union Pacific, is only waiting for money matters to be straightened and the war to be settled. Then it will build a line as far as Nevada, and meet the Central Pacific. That will make a slow-coach of the stage-coach, and put the Overland under-land—bury it, so to speak."

"Well," said George to Terry, "I guess we won't worry about our jobs for a while yet. How'll they ever pull trains over the mountains? Huh!"

They left Latham in the twilight. Agent Spotswood was going on through to Julesburg, so as to be on hand at every station. He and Mr. Holladay traded places with the boys, in order to drop them at Beaver Creek without bother.

"Another sixty miles—but I bet we don't do it in any five hours," asserted George.

"You're liable to make it in close to six hours,

though," replied the driver. "Ben'll average near ten miles an hour clean across; those are his figgers."

George counted off on his fingers.

"Half-past two in the morning! When Harry sees us 'light at Beaver from the Holladay coach he'll think he's dreaming."

"We'll soon wake him up. Shep'll be plumb tickled."

"Good old Shep!"

Until darkness closed in the road looked familiar. But, although the team were pushed relentlessly, the box was snugly comfortable for two boys and a man. At the next station out of Latham Eph climbed up, to sleep atop. Down inside, the stage king and Mr. Otis, and maybe Mr. Spotswood, were slumbering, at least between stops; but Terry and George had determined to stay awake.

Bijou, at last! Time, according to the driver's watch, ten minutes past midnight.

"Home stretch, boy," reminded Terry, of George, as with change of team and change of drivers also the coach started on. "I can smell Harry's apple pies."

"'Drather taste one," answered George.

"Where you two fellows hailin' from, anyhow?" asked the driver.

"Sulphur Springs, other side the mountains."

"Been ridin' all the way with Ben?"

"Yes. We belong at Beaver Creek."

"You must be those cubs that the station-keeper there is lookin' for 'bout day after to-morrow. He

certainly has pestered the life out o' the regular drivers. Acts sorter wild. 'Seen anything of a yaller mule, or a pair o' sore-footed cubs hoofing in from the west?' he asks. Reckon he doesn't know you're comin' special."

"We'll show him mighty soon," Terry blurted. "We're not the kind that walks."

They passed the halfway mark, at ten miles. Even in the heavy sand the team lagged not a moment—the driver kept them going, with whip and voice—he had the big boss and the division agent both aboard, and orders were orders. The reek of wet horse-hide drifted back on the dampish air; but Ben Holladay never spared horses when in a hurry.

"Five miles more. Hope we see a light before we get there," voiced George.

Beaver Creek was their own station; if it wasn't alert and ready it would be disgraced.

"I'll make a light there for you," promised the driver. "I'll whoop those hostlers out, unless they're deaf."

The miles steadily dwindled: to four, to three, to two, to one. By the light of a cigar the driver looked at his watch.

"Two-thirty o'clock," he said. "Those are a tough twenty miles for one team, but we came through in a good bit under schedule. It's hard on hosses when they're haulin' Ben Holladay. He's as bad as an Injun raid when he takes a trip over the line. Gwan!" He lifted the weary sixes to a heavy lope, out of the sand hills into the harder plain; and presently, removing

his cigar, he opened his mouth for a piercing yell.

All before was dark, while the yell went careening through the night.

"Durn those fellows," he muttered. "If they're asleep there'll be somethin' to pay, when Spotswood tumbles out on 'em. All together now, for a hair-raiser." And—"No; hold on," he bade. "That roused 'em."

A light had appeared, moving hither and thither. It was the stable lantern, being rushed from house to corral. Another light appeared. That was Harry's, shining through the station house windows. Beaver Creek was ready, and the boys might heave a sigh of relief.

"Wonder if they'll hook up those six mules," spoke George, anxious.

"They will if they have sense," Terry answered. "It's the best team. Wish we were running things ourselves."

The horses traveled hopefully, eager to be at the end of their long run. With jingle and rumble the stage bore down. The stable lantern was waiting, at the side of the road in front of the house. The coach lamps shone ahead, revealing the two hostlers, tousled and sleepy, but ready to jump—revealing the station house—and Harry standing in the doorway, peering out, but looking as fresh as a daisy and as smiling as a sunrise, in spite of the fact that it was half-past two in the morning.

"Whoopee!" yelled George, regardless of waking Ben Holladay. "Watch out! We're coming!"

"Got any dried-apple pie, mister?" called Terry.

He and George landed almost together, and rushed the astonished Harry. He stared, amazed, and then the three pumped hands. Shep bolted out and barked furiously.

"By the jumping John Rogers!" gasped Harry. "Next to seeing Jenny I've been hoping to see you. Wait a minute. Say," he called to the driver. "Any sign of that yellow mule up your way?"

"Nope. Nary yaller mule."

"Well," replied Harry; "doesn't matter to-night. The two other wanderers have returned, anyway. I can cut that pie I've seen saving for a month. We'll go on a pie spree."

Beaver Creek station's very best team, the six mules (which the Indians had missed), whirled Ben Holladay's special coach into the darkness, and, having watched it go at full speed again, Beaver Creek proceeded to celebrate the reunion.

CHAPTER XXII

BEAVER CREEK GETS ALARMED

STAGE KING HOLLADAY's time over this division, Denver to Julesburg, 200 miles, was twenty hours, including stops. He arrived at Atchison, the east end, 653 miles, in less than three days. He had cut the schedule in half, and had slashed five days from the schedule across continent. But, of course, every coach did not travel like the Holladay special.

Before all this was known to plains and mountains, Beaver Creek station had settled down to business again. There were the twelve head of stock, including the six prize mules, to be cared for, the same as usual; and the changes of teams to be made. When Harry was not cooking and housekeeping he spent much of his time figuring upon the whereabouts of Jenny.

"Duke is a gone coon, but I'll get Jenny back some day. I feel it in my bones," he declared.

The summer and fall and winter passed. Terry's father had not found the location that he wanted in California, but he had found health, and was returning to Denver. George's mother went East for a visit; his father was still in the Colorado cavalry, so

she dropped Virgie off at Beaver to spend the summer.

On the same coach there was another funny-man passenger, much like Mr. Sam Clemens. He was booked through from California. Virgie and Mrs. Stanton said that he had kept everybody in the coach laughing all the way from Latham.

He was a droll-looking young man of about thirty, with large nose and mustache and receding chin. His name was Browne, but as Artemus Ward he had written a book in New York, entitled "Artemus Ward: His Book," which was very comical, and as Artemus Ward he had been lecturing in California. Just to hear his drawl made people smile.

He did not eat much dinner, but appeared more interested in the scenery, such as it was.

"I've been talking so much in California that it's made me thirsty," he said to Harry. "What have you got as an alleviator. In simple language, I yearn to be changed from a dry lecturer to a wet one."

"There's the well," quoth Harry. "And if the well doesn't suit just help yourself to the river."

Mr. Artemus Ward squinted earnestly at the Platte, which was muddy and bank full, although shallow.

"That might be quite a respectable river if you'd set it on edge," he drawled. "It's a cute little thing, if you look at it from on top. What else have you got that's wetter?"

"Bitters' is all," replied Harry.

"What kind of bitters?"

"Sure Thing. I'm cleaned out of everything except that."

"Give me a trial drink of Sure Thing, then," Mr. Artemus Ward requested.

Harry set out a bottle of Sure Thing. Mr. Artemus Ward seemed to like the taste.

"How much of that stuff have you?"

"Nineteen bottles, from a case of two dozen."

"I'll take eighteen of those bottles. My system needs them," said Mr. Artemus Ward.

"But that leaves me only one bottle," Harry objected. "And they sell for \$1.50 a bottle."

"It makes no difference to me, young man," said Artemus Ward, "how many bottles you'll have left. I'm a poor hand at mathematics. All I know is, I'll require eighteen bottles, and I'll pay you \$2 apiece."

"How about some Pain Killer, too?" asked Harry. "After you take the bitters you'll feel pretty strong for Pain Killer."

"No; I'll take the bitters and advise my audiences to stock up on Pain Killer," drawled Artemus Ward.

And when he entered the coach he solemnly carried the case of a dozen and a half Sure Thing Bitters under his arm.

The coach rolled on, but Virgie stayed. They were glad, indeed, to have her at Beaver Creek. She came in mighty handy, to help Harry; for this summer overland traffic increased amazingly. The war appeared drawing to a close, and everybody in the East seemed to be setting out for the West. The stages were loaded, the emigrants and freighters passed at the rate of several thousand a month.

Gold was discovered in Montana—a big strike.

This brought more people. The Sioux tried to close the trail north of Julesburg, and the majority of the gold-seekers plodded by the stage road up the South Platte.

It was reported that Ben Holladay was to put in a branch line of the Overland, to run from Salt Lake north into Montana.

Cavalry—Iowa, Ohio and Colorado Volunteers—patrolled the stage road. George's father rode through Beaver, with a detachment of the Colorado troops. They were out to keep the road free of Indians.

On the last day of July Sol Judy turned up. He trotted in from the west early in the morning, right after breakfast and the departure of the west-bound stage, and dismounted to drink a cup of coffee.

Sol had been doing scout duty south on the Arkansas River. Terry had not seen him since the first days of the war; but now he was back on the Platte.

"Yes; I'm carrying dispatches on the Platte trail," said Sol, swallowing his coffee. "And, let me tell you, the Injun signs are bad. You ought not to have this girl here."

"She's as safe as she would be in Denver," laughed Harry. "You-all in Denver were scared stiff not very long ago. By what the papers said you expected to be massacred."

For an Indian raid along the old cut-off between Bijou and Denver, following a little fight near Fremont's Orchard on the stage road west of Bijou, had set the Denver people wild. A company of One Hundred Day men had been organized and were to be

turned into the Third Colorado Cavalry. Terry's father had joined.

"Well, that scare's over," admitted Sol. "I want to say, though, that the Sioux and Cheyennes are ugly. There aren't enough soldiers on the plains to lick 'em, and they know it. During the stampede in Denver a hundred Injuns could have captured the city. So I don't know where the safest place is, but I wouldn't choose Beaver Creek. If they get to raiding the stage road you fellows had better move out, to Godfrey's or American Ranch, while you're able."

Sol continued on his way down the Platte with his dispatches, for, although the telegraph had been run through to Denver, there was no operator between Bijou and Julesburg, 100 miles.

"I'd like to see the Injuns tackle us some time when we're ready," George swaggered. "That cannon was no good, but we've got other guns."

"I'd like to see them fetch in Jenny," uttered Harry. "I'll fight for Jenny. Concentrate your fire on any Injun riding a yellow mule, boys—but don't hit the mule."

"We've got Virgie to protect," Terry reminded. "Maybe one of us ought to take her to Denver and put her with ma."

"We will, first chance we get."

"I don't want to go," Virgie objected. "I'm afraid of the stage. We might be chased. But I'm not afraid here."

"Of course you aren't," Harry soothed. "We'll write a letter first, and ask whether they can look after

you in Denver. You're a little Amazon; and three men, an Amazon and a dog ought to be able to hold a station against common Indians."

"I'm not an Amazon," retorted Virgie. "I'm a Baptist."

Harry wrote the letter, to mail it by aid of the stage. But this morning, August 8, no stage arrived!

That was a strange happening. The change team stood harnessed and ready; the breakfast cooled, the sun rose higher, and down the road there still was no token of the stage.

"Well, that beats the Dutch," complained Harry. "One of you ride on to Godfrey's or the American, and see if they know anything."

George went. Godfrey's ranch was nine miles east, or three miles this side of the American ranch. A man by the name of Godfrey had started the ranch recently; he was an old-timer on the plains.

George appeared before noon.

"Naw, they don't know anything," he reported. "All travel seems to be stopped. They're wondering, same as we are."

"Expect we could find out more at Bijou, where the telegraph lands," said Terry.

"We'll wait for the east-bound stage first," decided Harry. "It may have picked up something."

The east-bound stage rolled in on time. It was bristling with weapons; every passenger was armed. Driver Bill Trotter held the ribbons.

"West-bound stage? There won't be any west-bound stage," Bill announced, to Harry's query. "It

was stopped the other side of Julesburg. The Injuns have raided the whole line from Julesburg to the Little Blue beyond Kearney, and the operator at Bijou says all traffic is hunting cover. This coach'll try to make through to Julesburg, but whether it'll go on or come back, I dunno."

That was a stunning bit of news. It rather sobered Beaver Creek station. After the bristling stage, bearing two frightened women and six well-armed men, not counting Driver Bill, had proceeded, the station hands discussed the situation.

Only Virgie was pleased with the outlook.

"Now maybe you can't send me to Denver," she challenged.

And traffic did seem paralyzed. No stage came from the east this day. Two emigrant trains, joined for mutual protection, toiled through, in great haste and very nervous, but Harry had no notion of trusting Virgie to them.

How they had found out, nobody might say; they asserted, though, that the raid had been a bloody one—ranches, coaches, freighters and emigrants attacked, on a front of 250 miles, and twenty or thirty people killed. All overland traffic was being held up and warned not to move except under guard.

"This division is clear yet, I reckon," mused Harry. "But, gosh! It's lonesome."

Another stage from Latham passed, for Julesburg. It carried only men and arrived off schedule. The driver had a Denver paper, which told the story, as received by telegraph, of the raid. The emigrants

had spoken the truth—it had been a big raid, and no stages were leaving Atchison. None would leave for the west until the road was patrolled by troops. None would leave Latham, either, for the east. The stretch between Julesburg and Latham was ordered closed.

This shut Beaver Creek off completely.

"Boys," Harry said briskly, "we can't squat here doing nothing. I see a way out."

"But we've got to stick, haven't we?" demanded George. "We haven't any business leaving the station unless we're ordered to. There aren't any Injuns 'round."

"How do we know? When they aren't around they're likely to be closest. But I've got a scheme."

"The worst they can do is to run off our stock again," answered George doggedly. "They can't get in."

"No, except through the door and windows and roof. And meanwhile we couldn't get out. But I see a way—I always like to see a way."

Harry's way was a tunnel. He proposed digging a tunnel, from the fire-place to the well. The inside end of the tunnel would be covered by the flat sand-stone slab used as a hearth, and the outside end should open into the well.

"About half way down," Harry figured. "There are only two or three feet of water. If we get smoked out of the house we'll crawl through the tunnel and drop into the bottom of the well. We might wet our feet but we'll save our scalps, and Virgie wouldn't be made into a squaw."

"I'd rather spoil my shoes than be a squaw," Virgie agreed. "Would the Injuns throw things down on us and smash us?"

"Nope," Harry assured. "They'd never guess we were in the well. We'd be hiding in the dark. Or we could pull the well right in after us, and then they wouldn't know about it!"

"How'd we get out after we were in?" demanded Terry.

"Humph!" And Harry cogitated. "Let the bucket stay down. Then we can shin up the rope. Or we can keep a pole at the bottom, with cleats nailed on, reaching as far as the hole. But whether we could back off the cleats into the hole I don't guarantee. I think we'll do both. Somebody might draw the bucket up without us."

They started at once to dig the tunnel.

There was no travel, no mail, no word of any kind. All the stations and all the ranches prepared for defense, and attended strictly to that alone. But what was doing outside, Beaver Creek did not know.

"My mother and yours will be worried sick," Terry asserted to George, as they toiled. "They can't hear from us and we can't hear from them."

"I don't blame 'em any this time," George grunted. "Expect ma worries most about Virgie. Wish we could get a chance to send her out. We have to stay, ourselves, to be ready when the line opens."

"If the soldiers come through maybe we can send her out with them. Your dad or mine ought to be along pretty soon."

"Guess the Colorado soldiers are busy watching around Denver," said George. "This is a big country to cover. They know we've got three men to take care of Beaver Creek—and we can sure do it. We aren't asking for help."

"No, siree!" Harry declared. "Ben Holladay'll never hear a squeal from the Overland stations. I'd rather be at Beaver than at some of them where there are only one or two hands, bunking in the stable with the stock."

Digging that tunnel was hard work. Luckily the distance was not great, and the soil was sandy enough so that it could be chopped out; but when they commenced to "gopher" in, and pass the dirt back to be carried away in bucket and gunny-sack, progress was slow.

They took turns mounting sentry and in driving the tunnel—sort of stabbing ahead and pawing the dirt rearward, for the fellow behind. Even Virgie helped. Harry proposed that they put a prairie-dog inside and start Shep after him.

"The dirt would fly then, all right," Harry gravely assured. "The only trouble might be that they wouldn't keep a straight line."

Each night they were dead tired. They slept so soundly that on the fifth night they never heard the arrival and departure of a west-bound stage at last. As it was five days over-due, they had not expected it, and the sole tokens of its existence was the presence of the sweat-stained team in the corral in the morning,

the absence of another team, and the tracks pointing up the road.

"That will never do," quoth Harry. "Great Cæsar! I suppose they didn't want to take the time to wake us."

"Well, how could we tell they were coming?" demanded George. "And they weren't on schedule."

"We'll have to tie a string to our toe and lead it to the corral," Harry proffered. "Then, when the Indians come, they can pull it to let us know."

No stage followed; they had missed their chance to send any word, or Virgie either; but the second day after they broke through into the well. Now they hustled to smooth the tunnel and enlarge it at the middle.

That was Harry's scheme again.

"We'll have to make a passing place, in case anybody gets stuck. It will do for Shep, too, if he balks."

They chopped with knives and a file, and completed the job. They completed it not a whit too soon. Virgie, who was out early in the morning, before Harry had done more than take a hasty survey, in undress, from the door, came running back.

"Somebody's out there," she proclaimed. "A whole lot, on horses."

"Where? How far?"

"Right off south, behind the house. I saw them. Do you think they're soldiers?"

Just as they were, all raced to peer around the corner of the house.

CHAPTER XXIII

GEORGE BRINGS QUICK ACTION

"WHEREABOUTS?"

"I did see them," Virgie insisted. "You keep looking. I saw two men on horses."

"Thought you said 'a whole lot'!"

"I guessed the whole lot. Two's a lot, isn't it?"

"Reckon it is, these days," agreed Harry. "But where are the two?"

The sun was rising, flooding the plains with its golden beams.

"I see 'em!" George cried. "I see one, anyhow—sitting his hoss atop that swell about two miles yonder. Injun, reconnoitering!"

"There's the other," proclaimed Harry. "Up on the roof, one of us."

And, acting on his own orders, he scrambled aloft.

"One's disappeared," said Terry, while he and George strained their eyes. "Gone to report, maybe. That means more. Gee, if they come this way——!"

"Wish we hadn't used that cannon for stove-pipe."

"The wind blew it off and busted it. It wouldn't fool the Injuns any more; they're wise to those tricks."

"Here they come! I see 'em all! Get the guns!" Harry bounded back.

"Close up, fellows. I've counted twenty. It's a war party."

"I told you I saw them," Virgie repeated.

"And the question is, did they see *you*?" answered Harry.

"What'll we do? Fight 'em off from the stable? Or fort in the house?" George queried. "We can cover the stable from here. I'll get up on the roof. I choose the roof."

"We'll close this house tight and stay inside, every one of us," Harry ordered.

"Twenty-two," reported Terry, who had been counting the band for himself.

They were plain in sight, issuing from between the bare swells, and cantering into the flat open. Warriors they were; now and again a lance-blade or an ornament glistened in the sunshine.

"But how'll we fight?" demanded George. "We've got to see to shoot. Ought to have loop-holes in those shutters."

"We can see out of the cracks. We don't shoot—not a shot." Harry had thrust them inside, and was barring the door. The window shutters had not yet been opened.

"Wh-what?"

"Why, fellows, fixed the way we are we wouldn't stand a ghost of a show with that bunch," Harry panted. "Drat the horses! Let 'em take the horses, as long as they don't take Virgie. If they'll take

the horses and leave us alone, that's all I ask."

"But what will Ben Holladay say?"

"He'll say we've got sense. I consider Virgie worth all the stock on the stage line. If there were half a dozen Indians, we'd lick 'em. With a couple of dozen, that's a different proposition. We haven't ammunition enough for an all-day fight, and I reckon they've better guns than we can muster. Besides, we've got to think of Virgie——"

"I'm not afraid," said Virgie. "You won't let me be a squaw, will you?"

"Not on your life, we won't. We'll put you right in the tunnel, first thing."

"But what'll *we* do?" blurted Terry. "The stage company'll expect us to look out for the stock."

"The stage company hasn't bothered much about the stock, or us either," Harry retorted. "In a case like this, we've got to look out for ourselves. There's a time to fight, and a time not to fight. Nobody calculated on a whole tribe coming at once. Where are they? Getting near?"

"Spreading out and coming right along." George had applied his eye to a crack under a windowsill. The interior of the house was dusky, but through several cracks the sunlight filtered, making little bars of golden dust.

Harry tugged at the stone slab, and propped it up with a stick. The mouth of the tunnel lay underneath.

"Our sole duty is to save Virgie, boys," he said. "Nothing else matters. If Mr. Lo rests content with

the horses, he can have 'em till the troops get 'em back. But he can't have *her!*"

"We don't go in the tunnel already, do we?" asked Terry.

"Virgie does. The rest of us will wait and see what happens. They may not try the house at all."

"I don't want to go in," pleaded Virgie.

"Just a little way. You can peek out."

Virgie rebelliously slipped backward under the edge of the slab.

"When we all come, you back along to the wide place, Virgie, so one of us can pass you. Feet first. Everybody feet first, remember."

"I'll remember," Virgie promised. "Where's Shep? Don't forget Shep."

"I'll bring Shep, sure."

"There's Jenny, Harry!" George exclaimed. "I see a yellow mule, anyhow. Yes, sir! I bet it's Jenny, and that scar-face Injun. He's a-coming for more Pain Killer."

"Where?" And Harry rushed for the crack. But George held fast, and he found another near it. Terry discovered a peep place, too, on the stable side. The leading Indians were just riding into view from it.

"Oh, suffering whillikens!" Harry groaned. "It's yellow, it's a mule—it's my beautiful Jenny, ridden by an Injun. That adds insult to injury. And I can't rescue her!"

"Wait till they come in range of my old scalp-getter. I'll give 'em a dose," proposed George. "I'll open the

window and tumble that fellow off the mule, and stampede the whole caboodle. Shall I? This old pistol of mine is a killer, when she gets started."

"Nope," firmly bade Harry. "Keep your powder dry, and keep the enemy guessing. As Artemus Ward says: They're bigger than we are, and we'll forgive them—as long as they don't touch Virgie."

The Indians approached warily, eyeing the premises as if not satisfied with the looks of things. They were well armed with guns, besides bows and lances—and Terry began to admit that in a battle to death they would make short work of two boys and a man defending a girl. They'd riddle the windows and door, poke fire in, tear open the roof, and take vengeance generally.

That had been the bloody history of ranches and of other stations, where the Indians had proved too many.

The Indians had halted at the stage road. Presently one advanced and shouted.

"Hello! Open door."

"Don't answer. Shut up, Shep!" Harry cautioned.

"I could pop him easy," whispered George. "Look at Jenny. She's going to hail us!"

For in the background the yellow mule (who certainly was the gaunt Jenny) had been staring with long ears erect and neck outstretched; and now, opening her mouth, she uttered a resounding hee-haw—hee-ee-haw.

"That's her voice," murmured Harry. "Oh, the wretch!" Some of the Indians had laughed, but Jenny's rider swung his quirt against her jaw.

The Indians acted puzzled by the silence at the station. They grew bold. A detachment of them dashed for the stable and corral, to seize the animals; others guarded; and others rode rapidly, scouting about for signs and exploring along the slough.

They seemed to have the notion that the inmates of the station had escaped. Their figures shuttled about before the peep holes. They were a-foot and a-horse, both. The corral bars had been wrenched down, and the stage animals driven out in a hurry.

Shep was growling low and deep. It was a wonder that the Indians did not hear him. Perhaps they did hear him, for pretty soon they were knocking on the door and fumbling at the window shutters.

Virgie's eyes fairly popped, as she knelt with just her face showing under the slab.

In the midst of the breathless excitement, while the knocking and fumbling continued and Shep crouched bristling, there was a sound of scuffling; Terry turned quickly. He missed George at once. George had been peeping through a window crack beside the door, in plain sight from the kitchen where Terry had stationed himself—and had disappeared.

Harry uttered a low exclamation, and Terry darted back on tiptoe—and just glimpsed George's boot vanishing up the fire-place flue! George had shinned the flue!

In surprising short order there was a loud bang, close followed by a series of whoops and yells—and down plumped George, covered with soot and almost wild.

"I got him!" he gasped. "I nearly got him—the Injun on Jenny. I didn't wait to see, but I bet I made him jump."

George had taken a hasty pot shot out of the chimney top!

"You—blamed—little—fool!" hissed Harry, furious. He closed his lips tight, grabbed the sooty George, and dragged him to the tunnel mouth. "Crawl back, Virgie. We're coming."

"Wait a minute! Can't you wait a minute?" George stammered. "Maybe I skedaddled 'em."

"You've skedaddled us," accused Harry. "You've burned the beans." He fumed, while they listened. "What did you do it for?"

"I wanted to fire one shot for liberty," George defended. "My old scalp-getter itched."

They listened, tense. The momentary uproar had died, while the Indians recovered from the surprise. Then, as quick as lightning, there came another burst of yells, and a perfect hail of missiles—arrows thudding into sod and wood, and bullets splintering door and shutters. Shep yelped.

"Flat on the floor, and crawl," Harry ordered. "Guns and all. Get back in, Virgie, to the wide place."

"Alone?"

"George will pass you. He'll go first."

"Aw, lemme close the rear," begged George. "I'll hold them off——" but a crash against a window shutter interrupted; and George, in spite of his spunk, paled.

He obediently squirmed backward into the tunnel

mouth, and, with an imploring "Wish I could give 'em another shot," withdrew his head from sight.

"You next; then Shep," ordered Harry, of Terry. He was crouching. Moccasined feet shuffled across the roof—a mass of burning hay dropped down the flue. The pungent smoke welled out into the room, as if the flue had been covered over.

Terry, with the shot-gun, entered the tunnel. While he was lowering himself, a window shutter splintered under the blows of a hatchet; Harry threw up his musket and blazed away, sending three buckshot through the splinters.

"No peeping, Mr. Lo," he rapped, undertone. "Leave me your shotgun," he directed of Terry. "Here comes Shep, now."

Shep's forequarters were thrust into the hole; Terry encouraged him by crawling backward and Shep began to follow.

Both barrels of the shotgun spoke dully. In a twinkling Harry was in the tunnel mouth, the slab fell with a thump. He had jerked away the prop.

Terry crawled, Shep had to follow, now, whether or now, for Harry was shoving with his feet. Amidst the almost pitchy darkness Terry passed the wide place.

"Wait a moment," spoke Harry's muffled voice. "Take one of these guns. 'Tisn't loaded."

The shotgun butt met Terry's groping fingers, as it emerged from underneath Shep.

"All right." And he continued his crablike move-

ment. His feet kicked out into nothingness. He had reached the end.

"Drop when you get there," Harry bade. "I'm coming head first. I'll hand down the gun you have."

"Drop straight. Don't kick so much." That was George, below.

Terry hung, feeling vainly with his feet, and hanging as long as he could, dropped, scraping the side of the well. He did not have far to drop, and landed in two feet of water—splash. Wow! He staggered and fell against George.

Harry's face dimly appeared, gazing down from the hole above.

"Catch the gun. I'll stay here a while, with Shep."

There was plenty of room at the bottom of the well for the three, and for the bucket in the middle. Straight above, the rope mounted through a square patch of light, which was the mouth of the well partially boarded over. The light shone in for only a short distance; down here all was gloom—and exceedingly damp.

Virgie's teeth chattered. Harry had vanished. The smell of smoke somehow wafted into the well, and a jangle of sounds entered with it.

Harry's face reappeared—an odd sight, dirty white, like a mask, as it protruded from the hole, in the dimness.

"They're burning us out," he announced with a grin. "I can hear the crackle—other side the slab."

"Glad we're somewhere else," murmured George. "They can't burn a well."

"Won't we ever get out?" Virgie faltered. "I'm wet."

"Pretty soon," Terry comforted. "This is better than being a squaw."

The Indians were yelling gaily, in great glee over their success. Harry stuck his face out again. It was streaked with sweat.

"That slab's getting hot," he reported. "Reckon I'll stay at this end for a spell."

"Where's Shep?"

"In the middle. Smell the hay? That hay's handy stuff for 'em."

Scarcely had he spoken, when the square patch of light above was darkened. The head of an Indian blocked it.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CHANGE OF QUARTERS

HARRY instantly snuffed himself out. George raised his arm, and his pistol—but Terry clutched at him warningly. Virgie clutched at them both. The Indian gave a hollow grunt, his head disappeared, and the well rope began to shake as he experimented with the bucket.

“Let it alone,” whispered Terry; but George obligingly helped the bucket to sink, as the rope slacked. The Indian proceeded to heave on the windlass.

Up rose the dripping bucket—up, up; and Terry and George stared at each other in fresh alarm. If the bucket stayed up, and Harry was cooped in the tunnel, how were they all to get out of the well? There had been no time for making a ladder.

The dangling bucket swung through the square hole, and vanished aside. Guttural voices sounded above. There was a brief interval of waiting and peering—and down through the hole popped the bucket, on return trip. Faster it came, from the spinning windlass; Terry had time only for one word, “Duck!” and he and George ducked, pulling Virgie under with them. The bucket struck—“Smack!”—

with a force that would have brained them had their heads been in its way above water.

They all bobbed up again, Virgie wellnigh strangled by the sudden plunge. But she did not dare to cough. The bucket was leaving on another journey aloft. This time it did stay up. Minute after minute passed, while they gazed expectantly. They heard the Indians' voices; the voices dwindled, then there was a chorus of whoops, the faint thud of hoofs, drumming the earth—and no bucket. Of course not.

Harry looked down from his burrow.

"Believe they're gone, folks. Do you want to come out?"

"How we coming?" George demanded. "They took our rope. That was a pretty mean trick. I could have plugged that Injun through the middle of the face, but I didn't."

"Yes, sir; he's a mean Injun—a mighty ungrateful Injun," Harry agreed. "I don't suppose he knew, though. Burning the house and all inhabitants made him thirsty."

"Well, we want to get out," Terry reminded. "It's wet in here. What do you ask us to do? Climb some cleats? I don't reckon Virgie could make it; she's so cold."

"They're likely to bust, too," said George. "And how do you know you can raise that slab? Things may be piled atop of it."

"I'll try. Keep your powder dry." And Harry withdrew.

They waited. Virgie wept, and they did not blame

her. The water was higher on her than on them. They waited—and they waited.

"We're stuck," groaned George. "We'll have to dig toe-holts, and drive pegs, all the way up——"

"There he is!"

The boards covering the mouth of the well were being torn away. The light streamed in, and Harry's head was poked into the opening.

"All hunky," he called. "Here comes the bucket. I've tied it hard and fast. She'll hold."

The bucket was lowered. It swayed into their midst, and they seized it.

"That's enough. Whoa!"

"Tell me when you're ready. Don't all get in at once," answered Harry.

"Who'll go first?" asked George of Terry. "You or I? What do you weigh?"

"I dunno, now. I don't weigh as much as you do. Didn't used to. Maybe I've picked up lately. The lightest ought to go first. That's Virgie."

"The heaviest ought to go first, to test it out——"

"But if it busts, then we'll all be holed in."

"I'd as lief test it," proffered George. "I ought to, because I stirred those Injuns up. I'd like to send Virgie—only I'm not sure—and somebody ought to be there to help Harry."

"Let me go. I'm not a bit afraid, and I can help Harry," proposed Virgie. "You'll catch me if I fall."

"I guess we'd better," George decided. "She's strong in the arms—awfully strong, aren't you, Vir-

gie? And she doesn't weigh much. Then if they can't hoist us out, we'll manage."

"Sure thing," agreed Terry. "Get aboard, Virgie. Lift her in. There you are. Now hang hard with both hands to the rope. 'Tisn't far."

"Haul away!" they shouted. "Virgie's coming first."

The windlass creaked; the rope tautened; the bucket, with Virgie standing in it and freezing to the rope, began to rise slowly, but steadily, while Harry labored.

Up mounted Virgie; and the rope shortened, and the windlass grumbled, and they stood peering after, braced to catch her should something give way.

She was framed a moment in the opening; Harry's hand extended and grasped the bucket edge—the bucket was as high as it could go with Virgie in it. He must have set the pin that held the windlass crank from turning back; for now he grabbed Virgie about the waist and wrenched her to safety.

"Good!" George breathed.

"All hunky!" Harry announced, somewhat breathless. "Next." And down sped the dangling bucket.

"You next," ordered George.

"No, sir. You," Terry objected.

"If I'm heaviest, I'm going to be last," stubbornly answered George. "So you might as well start. That'll get two of us out, anyway."

"Oh, come ahead," bade Harry. "What are you fighting about?"

"W-well," yielded Terry. There was no use in ar-

guing with George when he had his back up. He went.

He and Harry hauled George to the surface, and they were all together.

"Here's Shep!" Harry cried, as they turned.

Shep it was, bolting with a long jump out of the ruined house, charging for them, gamboling and whining, and then suddenly flopping down, to lick his paws.

"It's right hot in there," explained Harry. "I lay on my back and lifted the slab with my feet and scorched my soles near through. I left Shep to take his time."

"They certainly cleaned us out, didn't they?" George blurted, with a break in his voice.

That was so. The station house looked like an old, battered skull. The roof had been torn open, for smoke was curling out of it, the window on this side had been hacked into pieces, the door was charred through by fire outside and inside. The corral was flat—its poles and the hay had supplied plenty of fuel. The stable gaped in ruins.

Only the thick sod walls stood unharmed.

"You'll have no trouble drying your clothes. That's one blessing," asserted Harry, trying to be cheerful. "But the chief blessing is that we're alive and kicking."

"Won't the Injuns come back?" asked Virgie.

"No; they've gone on rejoicing. They think there's not enough of us left to bother with."

"Wait till I empty the water out of these boots,"

spoke Terry. "Guess we'll have to let our clothes dry on us—haven't anything to change to."

"You sit in that house a few minutes, and you'll be dry!" Harry laughed.

When they prowled about, they speedily found that Harry's words were true. The hay that had been poked into the house was only ashes, and the table and stools and other woodwork were smouldering, but the dirt floor and the sod walls still fumed with heat.

The counter and the few grocery shelves had caught. Harry fished about gingerly, and extracted several cans of sardines. The coffee pot was on the stove——

"Coffee warm," he announced. "Lucky I didn't dump it out last night. Well, nobody has to make a fire."

They heated the coffee, camp style, over a pile of already burning wood, and breakfasted on sardines and coffee, outside. Clothes were drying rapidly, in the heat and the sunshine.

"I was hoping that the smoke would fetch the cavalry," Harry mused, as his eyes again swept the horizon. "But like as not the nearest of 'em are twenty or thirty miles away. Expect the people down to Godfrey's saw it—they may be coming and they may not. Too late now. Folks are mighty cautious these days."

"What'll we do? Go on down there?" George queried.

"Yes, we'll pull out." Harry sobered an instant, as he surveyed the remains of Beaver Creek. Then he brightened again to his old self. "You don't like the well, and I don't much fancy squirming around in that

tunnel. It's confoundedly dark and lacks elbow-room. And we're rather limited in furniture and grub. We've held the fort as long as we ought to. Can you walk a little way, Virgie? You need exercise, don't you? I'd like to see if your legs are as strong as your arms."

"I can walk, but I don't want the Injuns to catch us."

"They won't. They're too tired. They worked hard."

"Wonder if we killed any of 'em," said George. "If I could have turned my old scalp-getter loose——"

"Did you see anybody when you shot with the shotgun?" Terry cut in, to head off the brag of the "scalp-getter."

"Nope; I blazed away into the door," Harry answered. "If we killed anybody, he didn't stay to report. But we'll ask Jenny, some time. She'll know."

With a last look around the forlorn Beaver Creek station, which they had grown to love, they set out for Godfrey's, their nearest neighbor.

"Only nine miles, and we travel light—inside and outside both," encouraged Harry. "Business isn't rushing, so we needn't hurry."

They arrived at Godfrey's Ranch about noon, and were given a hearty welcome.

"Yes, sir, we saw smoke up your way," Mr. Godfrey admitted. "But we number only two men and two women, so we have to sit tight."

The ranch was equipped like a little fort. A sod wall three feet thick and six feet high, and pierced by loop-holes, formed two sides of a square, with the

house in the angle. One side-line was extended to protect the stable, also. The stage road ran past in front, outside the wall, which opened upon it by a heavy plank gate.

The ranch house was a long, low sod cabin, scarcely higher than the top of the wall. It was a regular armory, with at least a dozen rifles and muskets of various patterns hung on elk-horn and antelope-horn racks.

"We're settled here, and we're prepared to fight off all the Injuns between Kearney and the mountains," Rancher Godfrey declared. "My wife can fetch down an antelope at 200 yards as well as I can; my daughter is a close second. What'll do for an antelope will do for an Injun. But as long as you boys want to stay we'll be glad of your help. The more, the merrier."

Mr. Godfrey's first name was Hollen. He was a strapping man, full-whiskered and good-natured, and acted as though he meant exactly what he said. His wife and married daughter were the two women at the ranch. The other man was Si Perkins, his son-in-law. The ranch had a few horses and cattle, and a store from which overlanders procured groceries, butter and milk.

There was not much business at the Godfrey Ranch just now. Day after day passed, without travel except by daring horsemen. According to their reports, and the news in a couple of papers borrowed from the American Ranch, three miles east, not a wheel was turning on the stage line, between Fort Kearney of the east, and Latham of the west.

All the great Overland route across the plains was

tied up hard and fast; horses and coaches alike were idle throughout a stretch of 350 miles. Ben Holladay had suffered a loss, in time and property, of \$100,000. But he was only waiting for the troops to be distributed.

Denver was enduring almost a famine; food prices had gone up amazingly.

However, nothing molested Godfrey's. It seemed to be about as comfortable a place as any. Harry managed to send out word, by a squad of soldiers that rode through, that Beaver Creek had been wiped out, but that all "hands," including Virgie, were safe at Godfrey's.

When this report had been put upon the wires and published in the papers, certain mothers and fathers would doubtless be much relieved.

Not until the last week of September, six weeks after the first big raid, was the blockade broken. Then, unexpectedly, the first stage forged past the ranch, bound eastward.

They all gave it a cheer. It was escorted by eight cavalymen, and carried only mail and the driver.

"Where you from?"

"Denver," yelled back the driver. "Forty-one sacks of mail a month old."

Harry followed it to American Ranch, the next station, to learn the news and to get the Godfrey Ranch mail. There might be some mail for Beaver Creek, too.

He returned with a little of everything. The coach had been the first out of Latham, on the east run.

Mail from California, Salt Lake and Denver was piled station high at Latham, and there were seventy-five passengers waiting to get out. Coaches were to be started regularly, one or two a day, and when the mail had been disposed of the passengers would be put aboard.

There were several letters for Terry—the earliest five weeks old—from Denver; and one for Harry, from the division agent.

Terry's mother had been in great alarm. She appeared to be feeling a little better toward the last, after she had known that they all were safe; but she urged him to come "home" as soon as he might. Terry laughed.

"How do I know where home is, yet? She says that after the Injun troubles are over, she and dad may take another trip East, to settle up things there. He's out with the Hundred-dayers, still. I guess the Overland is 'home,' just now."

"We ought to stick, anyhow," said George. "We can't leave the road in the lurch."

Harry's letter from the division agent directed him to remain at Godfrey's until further orders.

That night a stage from the east passed. After this the stages ran pretty much on schedule; the passenger coaches came in pairs, for mutual protection.

The line was re-stocked with horses and mules. Beaver Creek station was not opened, but Godfrey's was made the home station, instead, being strong and well-defended.

Some of the coaches changed teams at American

Ranch, some at Godfrey's; and the passengers took their meals at Godfrey's. That was the best arrangement, until the Indians had been thoroughly cleaned out, and the old system might be adopted.

The road from Bijou to Latham and the crossing of the Platte was closed. At Junction, five miles this side of Bijou, the stages turned south for Denver, by the old cut-off over which Sol Judy had driven on Terry's first Overland trip. The telegraph to Denver had followed this old cut-off.

In November the Colorado troops surprised the Indians at Sand Creek, down near the Arkansas River southeast of Denver, and shot them to pieces. It was hoped that this would discourage the Arapahos and Cheyennes—"put the fear of the white man into their hearts, and bring peace."

Terry's father took part in the battle, with the Third Colorado Cavalry; but the long march through snow and cold used him up again. After New Year's he and Mother Richards went East by stage. They stopped at Godfrey's for supper, and Terry was "powerful" glad to see them.

They were on an important errand. At Leavenworth or Fort Kearney Father Richards planned to meet General G. M. Dodge, who had been appointed to the command of the plains troops. Father Richards had served in the war under this General Dodge. Before the Civil War, the general had been a civil engineer, in the employ of the new Pacific Railway, and had explored westward for a route.

A lot of work already had been done at Omaha, the

starting-point of this Union Pacific Railway; the building of the line was going to be pushed right along; and, by the general's help, Father Richards rather expected to get a job with the engineering parties.

When he and Mother Richards went on from Godfrey's they took Virgie with them, to her own mother in Leavenworth. They left Terry, and George, too, somewhat excited. Building a railroad across the plains and mountains might beat tending stage station—and perhaps there would be use for two boys!

It was well that Father and Mother Richards went on when they did, and took Virgie. They scarcely had had time to reach the other end when Godfrey's Ranch saw sign of more trouble brewing for the Overland.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DEFENSE OF FORT WICKED

"SHOOTING-STAR! Look at the shooting-star!" George cried out.

They were returning to the house, from the stable, in the late dusk. The shooting-star brought them to a quick halt. Falling rapidly, it was cutting a long trail of fire a-down the dark southern sky—was quite the brightest shooting-star that they ever had seen.

They watched it until it had disappeared close to the earth. Then they hastened to tell the folks in the house about it.

"What's that?" Rancher Godfrey demanded. "Say it again."

"A big shooting-star. It burned from high up all the way down."

"Where'd it start from?"

"In the sky—wouldn't start from anywhere else, would it?"

"You may not be so smart as you think you are, young man," Rancher Godfrey reproved. "You saw the start, did you?"

"No, sir. But we saw it going."

"And it sure made a streak," added George.

"It did, eh?" Mr. Godfrey quickly stepped to the door, flung it open, and, followed by Mr. Perkins, his son-in-law, strode out. Out they all went, even the two women, into the crisp January night.

"Just watch the horizon in every quarter, and mebbe we'll see more of those 'shooting-stars,'" spoke Mr. Godfrey, with a certain grim tone.

They gazed. Suddenly Harry exclaimed.

"There you are! East!"

They caught it—the star; but instead of falling it was rising—swiftly up, up, to hesitate an instant, at the top of an arc; then to drop, fast and faster, and disappear like the first one had disappeared.

"Fire arrow!" Mrs. Godfrey breathed. "Oh, Hol-len!"

"Yep. That's the answer to the first, I reckon. Shooting-stars? Fire arrows, boys! Injun signals. Might as well go in. We won't see any more to-night—and I only hope we don't see the Injuns themselves in the morning. But those two bands are trying to get together, and I reckon they're due to cross the stage line."

"Si," said Mr. Godfrey, in the house, "let's you and I look over these guns, so as to be sure every one's loaded. Then we'll stack 'em handy by the door." This was done. "Now, boys, there are twenty loop-holes in that wall. In case of a scrimmage, each of us has got to take care of four—shoot promiscuous from 'em, like as if the ranch had twenty men. I'll keer for the four at the stable end, where things are liable to be hottest; Si can keer for the four at the

other end, to keep the red imps from flanking us there; you three stage fellows can divide up the balance. The women can load the guns, while we pump lead out of 'em."

Rancher Godfrey and Harry and Shep mounted guard this night in the stable. The three other "men" mounted guard in the house. It was a long, anxious night, but even Shep's nose had discovered nothing by morning.

When the danger-hour of daybreak had passed, they all had breakfast. The day promised to be cloudy and biting cold. The chores were done amidst a sharp lookout all around. There was no sign of any stage from either direction. About nine o'clock they saw a smoke in the sky away east, down the road.

"Must be the Wisconsin Ranch. Let's distribute those guns, boys, to have 'em ready at the loop-holes. That old double-barreled rifle goes with me. She's sure death to an Injun at 200 yards, the way I've got her sighted. One of those Sharp's I want, too. The rest don't matter, but they're all good. Si, he sorter favors the new Spencer repeater."

"Wait till you hear my humdinger talking," George bade. "She's a scalp-getter."

"Well, better save your pistols for close work," smiled Rancher Godfrey. "I don't doubt your humdinger, though."

"Couldn't we all join with the American Ranch, Hollen?" proposed his wife. "We've got time."

"What! Give ground to a parcel of thieving red-skins? Not while there's a sod left on that wall, or a

charge of powder for a gun. After that, there won't be any of *us* left—and then the scoundrels can have the place, and welcome. But don't you worry. No Injun outfit's going to set foot on these premises. Guess you can trust me, can't you?"

"Yes, Hollen; I guess I can," she agreed. "Trust you and Si and the Beaver Creek boys."

"That's how I feel," added their daughter. "And if the Indians come to close quarters, ma and I know what to do."

Other smokes arose. Hay was being burned; the raid had started. The defenders of Godfrey's Ranch paced up and down behind the sod wall. The wall set out from the house about six feet, making snug quarters, with just enough elbow room. They all ate dinner standing, so as to be alert for the first sign of Indian, near at hand.

Harry was standing sentry on a keg, to get a clear view over the wall.

"Here they come!" he cried; and everybody ran to take a look.

"Reckon there's no doubt about that," proclaimed Rancher Godfrey. "All right. We can't stop 'em yet. Every man to his post, though. Don't let 'em draw your fire at long range. That's one of their tricks to waste ammunition. Two hundred yards is the limit. If you aren't sure of your range and your mark, wait till you are sure. A dead Injun at 100 yards is a heap safer than a live Injun at 200. When you shoot, take your time to shoot mighty close, and be certain you aren't caught with empty guns. As long as our guns

are loaded, those Injuns'll never tackle this wall. They haven't stomach for that kind of fighting."

"Say! But there's a lot of 'em!" George uttered. "Over a hundred, I'll bet."

Mr. Godfrey was stationed at the stable end of the sod wall; Harry was next, George next, Terry had the angle, and Si Perkins held the short end beyond. By peering through the loop-holes or over the wall, they might see the Indians plainly.

George had spoken truth. There seemed to be more than 100, as they cantered into view, out of a dip about a mile in front of the ranch. One hundred and sixty they numbered, according to Terry's count, as they extended their line and galloped forward in a half-circle. They acted as though they were going to ride right over the sod fort—"Cheyennes, aren't they?" called out Harry—George was squinting hard along the barrel of a Spencer carbine poked through one of his loop-holes—Terry had his cheek pressed against the stock of another (they were army guns that Rancher Godfrey had bought or borrowed)—it was difficult to keep a bead on any one of the rapidly moving figures—he could sense the two women hovering anxiously, ready to reload the guns as fast as grabbed up, discharged through the loop-holes, and laid back again—Rancher Godfrey sprang atop the wall and shook his double-barrel in threat and warning both—the Indians, 400 yards away, yelped in a high chorus and their guns puffed smoke—a few of the balls pattered harmlessly—Rancher Godfrey walked a step or two and leisurely slid down inside to a loop-hole—"Nearly time to shoot,



TERRY BLAZED AWAY; GEORGE EDGED OVER AND BLAZED AWAY.
THE SMOKE HUNG.

isn't it?" mumbled George—"No! Not yet," cautioned Mrs. Perkins. "Wait for pa and Si. They know"—the Indian line was charging on, when——

"Bang! Bang!" sounded the rifles of the two ranchers. Terry pulled trigger, so did George, probably Harry did, too—an Indian opposite the stable end of the wall had toppled from his pony, and, wheeling right and left, the line of horsemen scurried back to safety.

"I got mine, all right," Si announced. "So did the old man, didn't he? You bet!"

"Shucks! Guess we missed, didn't we?" George growled.

"Well, we helped scare 'em off," answered Terry.

The Indian chiefs and braves held a brief palaver, at the long-range distance. Evidently they did not like the looks of the fort. They were suspicious of the loop-holes, and the gun muzzles thrust through.

Now the council broke. The chiefs and braves galloped to their places, the circle was reformed, widened, and extended until it enclosed the ranch buildings on all sides. There, 400 yards out, the warriors galloped to and fro, yelling and making insulting gestures, pretending to charge, and veering off, and that sort of thing.

They seemed to offer fine marks, against the snow, but Harry passed the order from Rancher Godfrey:

"They think they'll get our range—want us to shoot. Keep 'em guessing, boys. Save your powder. They can't hurt us by making faces and cutting monkey-shines."

"The American Ranch is afire!" exclaimed Mrs. Godfrey.

Smoke was welling up from the vicinity of the American Ranch. It was being attacked, too. But no attention might be paid to that, for the circle of Indians was getting tired of long-distance work. The chiefs were giving orders——

"Watch close, fellows," Si called. "There'll be doin's in a minute."

"They're going to charge, for a change. When they get close, every man to his mark," encouraged Rancher Godfrey.

The two women breathed hard, but uttered never a word.

Suddenly, to a great yell from every Indian throat, on the Harry and Rancher Godfrey side the Cheyennes launched their charge. Falling into single file a column of warriors hammered forward at full speed, whooping and brandishing guns and bows. Their ponies were fast—they rapidly lessened the space—to 300 yards—to 200 yards—to 100 yards—the guns of Harry and the rancher cracked—a pony pitched kicking and rolling, a warrior lay in a heap—and another—the air rang to shot and yell, the warriors in the background were shooting and yelling, also—but before reaching the wall the charging file turned sharply, each rider hanging on the far side of his pony as he swept by and fired hastily—and back they all scurried to the line.

"Watch out, here!" cried Si. "Now we get it!"

Scarcely had the one charge failed, when a second started for the new point.

"When I shoot, you other fellows give it to 'em," Si bade, running to a better loop-hole.

He waited; he blazed away; Terry blazed away; George edged over and blazed away. The smoke hung. Through the haze the file was coming on—bullets thudded into the sod, the painted leader had toppled, but the charge was unstayed. Terry dropped his empty Spencer and darted to another loop-hole and another gun—the file was coming on. Inside, along the wall, Si and George were shooting their best and the women were hurrying hither-thither, reloading—and at only thirty yards the charge swerved, Indian after Indian scudded parallel until he had emptied his gun also, and bending and hanging, fled.

They left several warriors and ponies flat on the snow.

"Hooray! How many'd you get?" panted George, his face smudged by powder.

"I dunno. How many'd you?"

"I dunno. Wonder if they've quit."

"Not yet," Si declared. "They're goin' to try again; try 'nother set o' loop-holes, I reckon. They won't leave their dead and wounded, either, if they can help it."

The Cheyennes were determined. They did try again, and again—charging furiously, and peppering the wall, to smother the loop-holes. But every set of loop-holes met them with a storm of bullets.

Swinging low, by pairs, from their ponies, they tried

to swoop their dead and wounded away. "Old Man" Godfrey made a specialty of stopping that. His double-barreled rifle certainly did great work, anywhere up to 200 yards. No rescue party succeeded, in front of *him*.

The Cheyennes kept charging. They gave nobody in the fort a minute's rest. What with peering and scampering and shooting, Terry grew so tired that he was numb, except for a throbbing shoulder and a blistered trigger-finger. His head whirled with the noise and the smoke, and the jar of the explosions. George had a puffed lip, from a kick by a gun-stock. The women's skirts were torn and soiled by running and stooping. The loop-holes were chopped and furrowed—a bullet had burned Harry's cheek, and Si had been half blinded by flying chips.

There came a lull.

"What now?" croaked Si.

A number of the Indians had dismounted, at their safe distance, to gather opposite the stable.

"They're going to try fire, boys," Rancher Godfrey called. "Stay where you are. We'll tend to it and to this end."

Between the buildings and the river the bottom-land was heavy with dried grass and weeds. Smoke arose; the dismounted Indians fanned with their blankets and robes; flames sprang up into the breeze; the crackling sounded fiercely and the fire itself charged for the hay stacked close to the corral.

Under cover of the rolling smoke the Indians fol-

lowed, shooting with their guns and with burning arrows.

"Guard the wall, you two!" shouted Si at Terry and George. He ran to the corner of the house, Harry ran between house and stable; Mr. Godfrey seized a bucket of water, and ran beyond the stable to the hay. Si and Harry shot rapidly through the smoke. The hay was smouldering—Rancher Godfrey doused it again and again, stamped the sparks, paid no attention to the hailing bullets and arrows.

The fire died out on the trampled snow—a tongue of it licked for the corral and the feed racks. Rancher Godfrey countered that, and the fire passed on, to quit of its own accord in the thinner grass.

With a hasty glance around to make certain, Mr. Godfrey rushed back to place. He had not been touched.

When dusk settled, the Indians withdrew, in groups, to the bottoms; made fires and acted as if they were going to camp for the night. They likely enough had plenty of meat, and were planning to watch the stage road both ways and wait until morning.

"Well," spoke Si, turning from his post, "what's fair for one is fair for t'other, I reckon. We can take it a little more easy ourselves. How many did we grass in this first brush, I wonder? What's your count, youngster?"

"Five, out in front here," Terry answered.

"Three 'round this end. That's eight."

Rancher Godfrey was striding down along the wall.

He was powder-stained and flame-scorched, his eyes bloodshot and his whiskers singed.

"Eight, you say? We went you one better. That's seventeen dead, and I dunno how many wounded. But the pesky varmints are bound to stick. By jiminy, they sure kept us busy. There are sixty bullet-holes in that one side of the stable, where they peppered me while I was fighting fire. We'll be hard pushed to hold out through another such brush, to-morrow. After the women folks get us a bite to eat, somebody'll have to ride for help—take his chance of breaking loose and reaching the soldiers."

"Up or down river, Hollen?"

"Up, west. The road east is closed. The American Ranch is gone, I judge; Wisconsin Ranch is gone; maybe Valley Station is gone. It's eighteen miles, anyway, and whether troops are still there, I daren't say. It did have a small bunch. But there are troops at the Junction; only twenty-four miles, and when a man got free he'd have an open road."

"I'll go," said Harry, behind him.

Rancher Godfrey quickly whirled on Harry.

"No, sir, you won't. Not unless we draw lots. These two boys are exempt, but we men'll draw lots."

"Not much!" And Harry laughed—a tired laugh, but none the less honest. "You've got wives to protect. I've nothing but myself. I ride light, too."

"*Can* you ride, so's to make it? That's the question, then."

"He's ridden Pony Express," Terry defended.

"George or I'll go, if he doesn't. We can ride."

Mr. Godfrey eyed Harry, sizing him up.

"What do you say, Si?"

"We can't all go. I'm perfectly willing to tackle it myself. I'll do anything to save these women."

"My idea exactly," smiled Harry. "And I'm going."

Rancher Godfrey's face cleared. He clapped Harry on the shoulder—which happened to be a sore shoulder, and made Harry wince.

"All right. You've got the nerve and the heart, Mister Man, and we'll fix you out so you'll do the business. You take that bay hoss of mine. With half a show he'll run a circle 'round the best Injun pony on the plains. Now we'll wait till plumb dark. The later, the better, as long as you get back at daylight. When daylight comes, we're in for another fight. Ammunition won't last forever, against a hundred and fifty Injuns. That's what worries me: the ammunition."

They took turns at sentry and eating supper. The darkness deepened. The Indian fires glowed; about ten o'clock they began to wink out, and the wailing and angry whooping and savage dancing to cease.

"Might as well start," remarked Mr. Godfrey, after another hour, rousing Harry from a snatched sleep. "I don't see any sign of Injuns on the plains side of the ranch. They're all camped where they can build fires. If you ride straight south, keeping the ranch betwixt you and the camp, till you're out of sight, then you can swing west and let your hoss travel."

The two women were strongly set against anybody's

going, but they were over-ruled. Harry prepared. He wrapped his feet in gunny-sacking; the horse's hoofs were also to be wrapped in sacking. That was to deaden the sound while he led his mount to a safe distance. Good scheme! The Indians' ears were sharp; they'd be alert for any token of movement from the ranch.

Taking the horse by the bridle-reins, and carrying a Spencer carbine, with the promise, "You can depend on me, people," Harry issued through the gate into the cold gloom. He silently disappeared. The night swallowed him amidst the lonely winter plain.

They strained to listen. Moment after moment passed. Rancher Godfrey slapped his thigh.

"By jinks, he's got away! Now if he doesn't lose his course——"

Hark! A distant shot—another, and another! A burst of excited yells——

"Oh, the dickens! They're after him," George groaned.

The women exclaimed. The pursuit cries died out in the night.

"Do you think they'll catch him, Hollen?"

"Not if he had time to take off that sacking. But he'll have to ride. He's got twenty-four miles ahead of him."

"Be ready to let him in if he circles back," warned Si.

"He'll not come back," asserted Terry. "He's not that kind. He'll beat the Injuns and keep a-going. That's his style."

"Guess so," George supported loyally. "Harry's no slouch on a hoss; and he said we could depend on him."

Quiet reigned abroad. The sounds of alarm had quit entirely. But it was an uneasy night. Asleep or on guard, they could not help wondering and fearing. Before daybreak everybody was up, to man the wall.

The darkness gradually paled to gray; the air had the feel of snow. Si was on lookout. Terry was just saying to George: "If they're coming, I wish they'd come," when Si shouted: "Here they are!"—at the same instant half a dozen fire-arrows streaked into the haystack. "Old Man" Godfrey's rifle spoke briskly, but the hay flared up with angry crackle, and, amidst a horrid outburst of whoops and gun-shots, the day-break attack was on.

It struck from all sides. The Indians were a-foot. Their dark forms swarmed over the snow. Terry let drive right, left, before, from now this loop-hole, now that, as fast as he could grab a gun and take hasty aim. George was darting and firing. The weapons of the two ranchers rang staccato. At the stable end "Old Man" Godfrey was shooting in defiance of Indians and burning stack both. The women were running frantically up and down, reloading the pieces. Shep barked. The whole length of the wall spit flame. The smoke of hay and powder hung chokingly; the bullets from without spatted into the sod, whisked through the loop-holes, driving showers of splinters before them; arrows were being sped high into the air above, to drop hissing, point first, and jut from the roofs and the wall top and chip the frozen earth, between.

It did seem as though the Indians were determined to make an end of the matter, at once. Of course, nobody wasted any time discussing that. To shoot, and to shoot hard and fast, was the business of the moment. Then, suddenly again, the attack slackened—Rancher Godfrey's voice cheered joyously—"They're running! Hurrah, boys! They've got enough!"—and through the smoke pall the forms of the Cheyennes might be glimpsed scampering wildly, with many a backward shot, but fleeing, nevertheless.

Si cheered, and sprang atop the wall.

"The soldiers! Hurrah! Here they come."

Terry scrambled, George scrambled, to see, regardless of bullet and arrow. From up the road, horsemen were pelting on. A part of them veered aside to chase the fleeing Indians who had bolted for their ponies and were scouring away. The rest galloped to the little fort. The first to arrive was Harry, with Sc! Judy close behind, and George's father.

The gate was already open for them to ride in, but Terry and George had leaped outside to greet them.

CHAPTER XXVI

HARRY RESCUES A FRIEND

Now it was afternoon at Godfrey's. The detachment of the First Colorado Cavalry had stayed to rest their horses and to eat. The Cheyennes had speedily retreated out of sight. Nobody at the ranch had been hurt seriously. The hay was the chief loss. Harry had told his story. The Indians had chased him, but he had given them the slip and arrived O. K. at the Junction.

A wounded Cheyenne had been brought into the ranch by the soldiers. He grunted to Sol's questions—and Sol had laughed.

"He says this place is heap bad for Injuns. Cheyennes are going to call it 'Fort Wicked.' Wants to know how many men it has. He doesn't see 'em, but he thinks it mustered at least fifty, by the way it shot."

"Fort Wicked, eh?" Rancher Godfrey replied. "That's right. It can act up mighty wicked when it's riled. The name's good. We'll adopt it."

And as "Fort Wicked" the Godfrey Ranch was known. "Old Man Wicked," the plains people proceeded to call Mr. Godfrey himself.

Sol and a squad had scouted to American Ranch.

They returned with bad news. George's father, who was lieutenant commanding the detachment, made ready to march east.

"You station hands are to ride along with us, George," he bade. "We'll take Godfrey and his family, too, if they'll come."

"Aw, no!" objected George. "We'll stay. We've got to stay and tend to the stages."

"We're going right on through to Fort Rankin at Julesburg, and we've instructions to clean up the line as we go; move everybody that we can, under escort. There may not be a stage either way for a month. As like as not there's scarcely a station or a ranch along the Platte between the Junction and Julesburg, except this one. I'll take you—and Terry, too," added Mr. Stanton. "His mother and yours have had worry enough; and I can't say that his father and I have rested very easy, although, of course, we felt that you both had to do your duty. But now you've got to pull out to safer quarters than a stage station alone in Injun country, and of no special use, either."

"Is Harry coming?"

"He has orders to. He's worn out. A man that fought Indians half a day and then rode fifty and more miles by night is entitled to a rest."

"But we ought not to leave Mr. Godfrey," Terry pleaded.

"How about you, sir? Will you take your family out to Rankin?" inquired Lieutenant Stanton, of the rancher.

"No, sir! Leave us ammunition, and we'll hold the

fort. I've worked too hard on this ranch to give it up that way. I don't fear the Injuns, as long as we can fight. That band won't come back; and I reckon they're all going to steer clear of Fort Wicked for some time."

"Well, I'll leave you a corporal and squad for a few days till the road's patrolled a little better. That'll give you a chance to rest yourselves. The telegraph wires are down. You're cut off completely. So I don't want to strip you. But I'll have to take the station hands. Those are the orders."

"That's the proper thing to do," assented "Old Man Wicked." "These two boys have done their stint, and so has Revere. They won't be needed, and it's time they got out."

Harry had snatched a little more sleep. When awakened for the start, he tried to appear as fresh as the usual daisy. Horses were readily supplied. There were the stage stock and the ranch stock; and the soldiers had caught a couple of Cheyenne ponies, wandering loose, and saddled and bridled, Indian fashion.

One was spotted—a pinto, or "paint"; the other was jet black. These were promptly turned over to the "boys"; the pinto fell, by lot, to George, the black to Terry; and they certainly were prizes. They bore Cheyenne brands, and doubtless could travel all day. The saddles were Mexican saddles, high before and behind, and narrow, but mighty secure. The stirrups had been cut off and buffalo-hide loops suspended, through which the rider thrust his leg when he wanted to hang at one side; but stirrups could be easily at-

tached. The bridles were regular bridles, of Mexican curb bits—jaw-breakers—and braided horse-hair reins. Each pony was dragging a hide neck-thong, or lariat. All in all, the boys were, as Terry expressed it, “plumb tickled” with such spoils of war.

Harry fared well, too. Mr. Godfrey insisted upon giving him the fast bay horse, which, after a feed and rub-down, seemed ready to set out again. The stage stock was left at the ranch, until the company called upon it when the stations were opened again.

Fort Rankin was a short mile this side of Julesburg, and Julesburg was about seventy miles from Godfrey’s. Snow was falling at last, the cavalry had to move slowly and cautiously, and the trip proved to be long.

This day they got only as far as American Ranch. Alas for American Ranch! Its doors and windows gaped blackly. Not a living thing remained. The ashes were warm, but the bodies of the men were stiff and cold. Mrs. Morrison, the wife of the station-keeper, probably had been carried off.

Sol circled about and struck a trail. He led a squad out to follow; was gone all night and until the next noon, but never sighted an Injun.

Wisconsin Ranch had been burned. At Valley Station there were a number of refugees, mainly women and children; the little handful of troops had been unable to move. The stage road down to Julesburg was reported to be swarming with the Indians.

So the detachment marched more cautiously than ever. Things looked very serious. The weather had turned bitterly cold, thirty below zero; the ranch peo-

ple now and then picked up had to be protected, and the country scouted, right and left.

Other ranches had been attacked, and other stage stations. Several were still in flames; Indians were sighted, reconnoitering from the hills. The telegraph wires had been broken and dragged about over the ground; what was occurring down the trail nobody might say.

On account of the halts, and the weather, and the side-stepping to avoid ambushes, it did seem as though Fort Rankin and Julesburg would never be reached. But the miles lessened in number; to fifty, and to forty, and to thirty, and twenty, and ten, and five——

Sol Judy had been scouting in advance. He came dashing back.

"Julesburg is being attacked, Lieutenant. You can see the doings plain, from top o' next rise. The fort acts as if tied up hard and fast, but we can make it if we push right on 'fore the red rascals head us off."

Fresh smoke was beginning to well sluggishly into the eastern sky.

"Close up, men," ordered George's father. "Trot—march!"

At trot or fast walk to favor the refugees, the detachment pressed on.

"Maybe now I get my old humdinger in action," said George to Terry, as, on their nimble Cheyenne ponies, they rode in the lead, flanking the commanding officer who luckily was George's father. "She hasn't had a real good chance yet, but she's a scalp-'em-alive gun, all right."

"This musket is too blamed long for saddle use," asserted Terry. "She sure makes a noise, though, when she's turned loose."

All eyes were anxiously searching the country before. The smoke welled thicker, but not high. It was kept low by the still, raw air of the river bottoms.

Sol guided aside, to leave the road and to make a detour around the shoulder of the rise. They all followed through a shallow draw of the open country, making toward the right, and putting the smoke quartering ahead on their left.

"I hear 'em!" George exclaimed. "Hear 'em yelling; don't you?"

"Not much shooting," remarked Terry.

"Naw. Dad says there aren't enough soldiers in the fort yet to do anything."

The yells were faint. Sol led on, keeping to the low ground, on a half circuit; gradually the smoke grew larger. The low ground was about to end. Up the left-hand slope they trotted, and thereupon emerged into full view of Fort Rankin, and of Julesburg station beyond.

"Gee whizz! Look at 'em!" gasped George, as everybody stood in the stirrups to peer.

Fort Rankin was almost opposite. It had been a ranch. The Government had added sod buildings, and a sod wall to surround them; the flag was floating from the flag-pole in the center—and now the boom of a cannon sounded and a shell burst out a way, toward Julesburg.

Several Indians scouting there ducked and scampered, but the shell had done no harm.

All Julesburg station was clouded by the smoke of hay and burning logs. Through the smoke a perfect throng of Indians were moving hither-thither, as busy as bees: plundering the store and stables and house, throwing things about, capering and dancing drunkenly, and driving ponies, loaded with sacks of flour and corn, in a constant line across the frozen river. Another line of ponies, traveling light, was returning. The lines looked like lines of ants.

"If we ride straight for the fort we can cut through 'fore the main band sees us, 'count of the smoke, Lieutenant," called Sol.

"Form platoons, women in the middle," ordered George's father. "Keep going, men. There's only a scattering of the varmints near the fort."

"The stages! See the stages!"

That was the sudden cry, drawing all eyes, as the little platoons trotted across the snow for the fort at the river.

Around the thinning edge of the smoke pall at Julesburg two stages were tearing, horses at gallop, drivers swinging their whips, coaches bounding and swaying—making for the fort, also. A squad of cavalry kept pace on either side.

The Indians had seen; they were beginning to dart from the smoke, and race the coaches, whooping and plying guns and bows. The stages were running the gantlet—they could not turn back, they could not reach the station, they had to reach the fort.

It was a stirring sight. Those drivers and passengers were brave. If they got through, they and the Stanton detachment would arrive at about the same time, from right-angle directions.

The fort cannon boomed; a shell burst above the stages; the horses swerved—so did the Indians, but did not slacken.

The race took the attention of the few Indians nearer the fort from the Terry-George-Harry column. They appeared to think the race a good joke. They kept out of the way, and jeered and laughed; by their foolish antics, part of them were drunk.

"Don't stop to shoot, men. Go on, go on," ordered George's father.

But——

"By the great horn spoon! I won't stand that!" It was Harry's voice, speaking abruptly. Away he sped, furiously, at a tangent.

A single Indian had cantered up out of a brushy little wash, within fair shot of the detachment, and, sitting his saddle, was cavorting about and making the most insulting kind of gestures. His mount was a yellow mule.

"There's Jenny!" George yapped. "Harry! Wait!" And then, with a muttered, "You darn fool!" in an instant away scoured George, to the rescue.

Terry did not pause to consider. He whirled his pony, and was away, too. He heard shouts of alarm and command from the soldiers, but he didn't take time to notice what they said.

The Indian started to flee. He plunged down into

the brushy wash, and out again on the other side. Harry's bay was fast—old Jenny was stiff and slow, and had been hard used. George's "paint" was fast—but he could not overtake Harry, and Terry could not overtake George.

They all strung out, and the soldiers dared not shoot much for fear of hitting one of them, and the cavalry horses stood no show in the chase. Even Sol was left behind.

Into the shallow gully plunged Harry, on his bay, and out; he yelled—"Get off that mule! Here, Jenny! Here, Jenny!"—and Jenny actually half turned, and balked. Other Indians had jumped out of the gully to join the fracas. But Harry seemed wild. The Indian on Jenny wheeled full about—he was the Scar-face! He was the same Scar-face who had stolen the Pain Killer bottle.

"Get off that mule!" yelled Harry; he up with his carbine and fired—at maybe fifty or sixty yards. George was hammering after, waving his "humdinger" pistol, and shrieking.

The Scar-face on Jenny drew bow, and let fly; the arrow streaked so swiftly that Terry scarcely saw it flit before Harry fell sideways, and landed on his shoulder.

The Scar-face uttered a triumphant whoop, and tried to kick Jenny into a run for the scalp; but Jenny objected and at the moment George's "humdinger" whanged tremendously.

Out of the saddle sprawled the Scar-face; with a rush George passed Harry, yelling and cheering as if

crazy; he shot right and left—and his “humdinger” clogged and quit. But that made no difference; Terry blazed away with his musket, and didn’t hit anything; the Indians were scampering just the same—clearing out, all streaming in the one direction. And see! See, again! One of the stages—the second—had overturned; the horses of the other were trying to bolt, and the passengers of the over-turned coach were running to gain either the first coach or the fort!

They were his mother—yes, sir; and George’s mother; and Virgie: running as hard as they could, with his father and the driver helping, and the squad of soldiers fighting off the Indians, and the coach before jerked about by the frantic team.

Terry watched, fascinated by horror. Out of the first coach leaped two men, guns in hand. They sprang to the lead team’s bits—were dragged about while the two women and Virgie were fairly thrown inside; his father followed, the driver who was a-foot climbed, at a jump, to the box; as the coach passed with a rush the two men dived headlong into the open doors, the doors were slammed and the stage dashed on for the fort.

Cavalry spurred out to meet it; the cannon sent another shell; hurrah, the Indians dropped back! Now——

“Do you fellows want to lose yore hair?”

Sol Judy was hailing, as he arrived here with George’s father and half a dozen of the Colorado soldiers.

“If you don’t, you’d better hustle back.”

"I plugged him! I plugged that Scar-face!" yelled George wildly, from where he was sitting his pony, holding Jenny by the bridle thong, and looking down at the crumpled Indian. "Do you want his scalp? I told you my old humdinger was a scalp-getter when she had a chance."

Harry was sitting on the ground, pressing one hand to his thigh, but much alive.

"Here, Jenny! Oh, Jenny! Hey! You bring my Jenny!"

"Let that dead Injun alone and get out," ordered George's father. "Wait a minute, Harry. Help him up, some of you men. We've no time to lose."

"Can you ride to the fort, Harry?" queried Terry, hurrying to him. He had an arrow sticking in his hip.

"Sure I can—on Jenny. That arrow surprised me so it knocked me off. Felt like a mule kick. Ouch! Easy, you fellows. Here, Jenny! Beautiful Jenny!"

"Hee-haw!" Jenny brayed, her nose outstretched to sniff at her master.

The Indians paid little more attention, except to jeer. The majority of them were more intent upon plunder than upon fighting. Under cover of the cavalry carbines and the fort howitzer the little party arrived, at the gate, "all hunky," according to Harry. He had ridden Jenny; Terry led the bay horse; George continued to explain about the "humdinger," which had proved to be a "scalp-getter."

"Scalp-saver, rather, I'd call her," corrected Harry, a bit crooked by reason of the arrow. "When I hit

the ground I expected to wake up with my hair gone."

They entered the fort, and there was a great how-de-do.

CHAPTER XXVII

A BIGGER JOB AHEAD

It was no wonder that Harry had been knocked from his horse. The arrow-point was a frying-pan handle, nine inches long. The hoop-steel handle of a frying-pan had been ground sharp, at the small end and on the edges, and fastened to a shaft almost three feet long!

The whole contraption was quite the largest, heaviest arrow ever seen by anybody at the post, and must have been driven by a powerful bow.

The point had doubled in Harry's thigh-bone. To extract the arrow was a problem. The post had no surgeon. Finally they took the blacksmith's huge pincers, Harry stretched out, and held fast, and by standing on him and tugging with the pincers they wrenched the arrow free.

That was not a pleasant operation, but after it was over Harry felt "as comfortable as possible." Besides, he had Jenny back again.

The coach bore the scars from twenty bullets and arrows. However, nobody in either coach had been hurt. Now, with all safe in Fort Rankin, there was

little to do except watch the Indians and wait for them to go, or for reinforcements.

The Indians numbered at least 1,000. They appeared to be having a fine time, sacking Julesburg, and celebrating with fire and dance and feast. They dared the soldiers to come out; once in a while squads did go out, and after a skirmish or two, came back.

The Indians stayed all that night, until they had grown tired of fooling. In the morning they began to leave by bunches; crossing the river and trailing north. Julesburg station had been destroyed, but anybody that wished was at liberty to go down and look at what remained.

One of the two men who had been traveling in that first coach was Mr. Andrew Hughes, Overland assistant general agent from Atchison. He was on his way through "special," with one companion and the driver, to open the road, if possible, in spite of the Indians. They had caught the Richards-Stanton coach at Kearney—"and what one coach could do, two could do, so we joined company," explained Terry's father. "And when we sighted the trouble at Julesburg, the fort was the only point within reach and we simply had to break to it with the help of the escort that we picked up a few miles back."

"I wasn't afraid till we got tipped over," Virgie declared. "Then I thought I'd have to be a squaw, sure. I sha'n't ride any more in these old stage-coaches. I'm going to wait and ride on the steam train."

"Where?"

"Across the plains."

"How soon?" George bantered.

"Well, just as soon as our father and Terry's father build the road for them."

"Oh!" exclaimed Terry, reminded. "Did you get the job, Dad?"

"I have the promise. I saw the general. He's engaged to be the chief engineer, when the war closes. I can go out with him on the construction work; and so can Mr. Stanton if he wants to. They'll need men, especially former soldiers."

"We'll go, too, then!" cheered George. "Won't we, Terry? Help build a railroad! Sure thing! How long will it take, Mr. Richards?"

"Some folks say ten years, but General Dodge says he'll do it in three, after he's once commenced the grading."

"How far, though?"

"From the Missouri River across the mountains into Utah; maybe farther, until we meet the Central Pacific, building east out of California."

"Gee whillikens!" And Terry walked on his hands. He flopped right end up again. "We'll get Harry on the payroll, too. What'll we do, I wonder. Drive a team or drive spikes?"

"No, sir! We'll ride our ponies and chase Injuns and hunt buffalo for meat," George proclaimed.

"Or run an engine!"

"Shucks! I haven't seen an engine for so long I forget what it looks like," confessed George.

"You'll have plenty of time for choosing your par-

ticular jobs," replied Terry's father. "And then the Union Pacific Company may choose them for you—if there's a call for green hands at all! I'd advise you to practise swinging a pick."

This did not sound as attractive as hunting buffalo or running an engine.

At any rate, nothing could be done here at Fort Rankin toward building a Union Pacific railroad. The great Holladay Overland Stage Line, with its 250 Concord coaches and 6,000 horses and mules, and its 3,000 miles of main line and branch lines, was more important at present. It had to be kept open, or there would be no travel. The telegraph wires and poles were down, too, and the East could not hear from the West, nor the West from the East.

Having wrought their worst, in this last big raid, the Indians were retiring north. The soldiers and the stage people and the telegraph people worked hard for two weeks, patching the gap west of Julesburg.

It was a tough trip from Rankin to Denver, with one of the first stages out: the stations few, yet, and the meals even farther between, and Harry's hip paining him like sixty, and Indian signs—ruins, and signals, and skulking figures—setting one's heart to beating. In fact, as Harry admitted from the coach, such riding made a fellow nervous. Shep's tail drooped most of the way, as he loped and trotted—by aid of an occasional lift keeping up with the plodding coach, and the escort including the two Cheyenne ponies and their riders.

Harry's wound from the frying-pan handle did not

heal worth a cent. So, although the Overland Stage Line soon was doing business as usual, the late Beaver Creek hands decided to "lay off" and stay at home for a spell.

"I should think you'd be very glad to," prompted Terry's and George's mothers.

"We stick together. It wouldn't be any fun without Harry," George asserted.

"No. And we've got something better ahead of us, when he gets well," agreed Terry.

"Jenny's satisfied, if you-all are," said Harry. "She had a harder time than anybody, trying to live red. I guess I'll have to let her live yellow-white—a *cream* life—again, for a change, till we're due to tackle the iron trail."

THE END

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